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SYSTEM AND NORM IN LITERARY EVOLUTION:
FOR A MARXIST LITERARY HISTORY

I. Russian Formalism provides a number of central categories for the construction of a non-teleological Marxist theory of literary evolution. In this paper I am concerned with working out some of their implications and in extending them to different problem areas. Particularly in its latter phases, the Formalist school worked towards a dynamic conception of the temporal field in which the literary text is situated; this field is constituted by the unity of the diachronic and synchronic systems to which the text belongs, that is, by the fact that every diachronic series is at each moment determined by the systematic configuration of elements at that moment, and that conversely "the synchronic structure of the work includes diachrony in that it carries within itself as a negated or cancelled element those dominant modes of the immediately preceding generation against which it stands as a decisive break, and in terms of which its own novelties and innovations are understood."¹ The text is not seen as an object but as a process, and our attention is not directed to the achieved finality of the work but to the transformational structure of textual production and reception; this structure integrates the work into a series of three moments—production, automatization, and defamiliarization (new production)—so that the historical dimension of the work involves not only its past (the norms against which it reacts) but its future (the transformation of norm-breaking features of a work into a new norm). Thus, "Pure synchronism now proves to be an illusion: every synchronic system has its past and its future as inseparable structural elements of the system," and the opposition of the concepts of system and of evolution "loses its importance in principle as soon as we recognise that every system necessarily exists as an evolution, whereas, on the other hand, evolution is inescapably of a systemic character."² But perhaps even more important than this
attrbution of a diachronic depth to the concept of system is the Formalists’ stress on deviation from the aesthetic norm as the central factor in literary evolution (as Striedter points out, this is directly contrary to the New Criticism’s emphasis on the norm itself*). What is immediately valuable about this is that artistic value is no longer measured by the optimal fulfillment of the norm (a notion which underlies all those theories which view the “great artist” as one who is most expressive of the consciousness of his class or society, who corresponds most adequately to its ideological needs); rather, the literary norm is associated with the automatized and the canonic, and “linear” succession, the maintenance of the norm, is reserved for the merely reproductive activity of literary schools and epigones.* The function of the reigning literary norm is thus inherently ambiguous: it is at once the recognized and sanctioned standard of literary production; and yet—precisely because of this—at the moment of its ascendancy it has lost its cognitive value, has become “formalized,” an empty shell.

The theory of literary evolution which was developed from the view of new creation as a destruction of the canonic state of the literary system (a destruction which is always a determinate negation, insofar as the negated norm leaves its trace within the new construct, so that the history of the form is present as a kind of accretion of broken prohibitions within the new work) runs directly counter to the classical concept of literary history as a continuous linear process moving through the homogeneous “objective spirit” or “style” or “sensibility” of unified epochs. Writing against such an organic-teleological concept of “evolution,” Tynjanov says that

when people talk about “literary tradition” or “succession” . . . they usually imagine a kind of straight line joining a younger representative of a given literary branch with an older one. As it happens, things are much more complex than that. It is not a matter of continuing in a straight line, but rather one of setting out and pushing off from a given point—a struggle. . . . Each instance of literary succession is first and foremost a struggle involving a destruction of the old unity, and a new construction out of the old elements.*

The notion of struggle indicates the disjointed and discontinuous nature of change within the literary system, and Wellek goes so far as to see a Hegelian element in this conception: “Dialectics replaces the principle of continuity. Sudden revolutionary changes, reversals into opposites, annulments and, simultaneously, preservations constitute the dynamics of history.” The comparison is interesting but probably of limited value, because the literary historiography of the Russian
Formalists is marked by an absence of the Hegelian sense of teleology; if reaction and deviation are the structural principles of literary change, there can be no question of a goal, or even necessarily of a congruence with other areas of human activity.

But even if we can posit a large degree of autonomy for the literary series, the "specifically literary" processes of change within the series are still social phenomena. It is the Formalists' inability to go beyond a mechanistic conceptualization of the processes of automatization and defamiliarization (ostranenie) which constitutes their major theoretical weakness. In particular, the interplay between these two moments is treated as a quasi-automatic process. Thus Šklovskij:

a work of art is perceived against a background of, and by means of association with, other works of art. The form of the work of art is determined by the relation to other forms existing before it. ... Not only a parody, but also in general any work of art is created as a parallel and a contradiction to some kind of model. A new form appears not in order to express a new content, but in order to replace an old form, which has already lost its artistic value.¹

The accentuation of the primacy of intertextual relations, and their role in motivating systemic change, is important and fruitful as far as it goes, but the interesting phrase here is the last one: the word "lost" suggests a natural process, as though the change in artistic value were organic and not governed by changes in the work's reception.

If, however, instead of conceiving of automatization as an automatic and organic process, we see it as the effect of a revaluation of the work brought about by its "inscription in social contradictions,"¹⁰ i.e., as a moment of its reception, then we can work towards an understanding of the mechanism of this process. The Formalists tend to separate the moments of canonization and automatization, but clearly the two are intimately connected; and this suggests (given the control by the hegemonic class over the institutions of legitimation) that automatization is effectively a consequence of the adoption or sanctioning of a literary product by the ruling class (or its ideological representatives). The automatized work is a work which has been legitimised, and thus has been appropriated into the sphere of the ideological. What is important here is that we conceive of this ideological state not as a fixed quality in a text but as a result of the position assigned to it in relation to the ideological structure; thus a work will mean differently and different things at different times, according to its more or less canonic status. The literary norm, therefore—the dominant and legitimate formal and thematic features
in a given synchronic system—will represent the actual ideological state of the system. Normative value will be held by (1) the "classical" texts; (2) writers who have attained "official" recognition; (3) their epigones; (4) writers in the "low" genres (e.g., the mass media) working within dead traditions. This is a very schematic description, and obviously the real distribution of ideological authority is much more complex (for example, there is a constant possibility of using the "classical" texts against the grain of their official status—e.g., Kafka's use of Dickens; "official" recognition is usually based on distortion, and is usually incomplete, so that a writer may well survive his laurels; and although "low" genres tend to function anachronistically, they tend also to provide the impetus for new directions within the "high" genres—cf. Robbe-Grillet's or Etienne Leroux's use of the detective novel). Nevertheless, in principle we can assume a direct connection between canonization and the investiture of a work with ideological value. The agents of this investiture are the ideological institutions (the School, the Church, the media, the salon), supported by the activity of epigones, and their task is primarily to neutralize the new product; as Foucault expresses it: "in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organised and re-distributed according to a certain number of procedures, whose role is to avert its powers and its dangers, to cope with chance events, to evade its ponderous, awesome materiality." The control of discourse—its neutralization, automatization—implies removing the work from its real historical time and situating it in the universal second nature of ideology; it becomes a part of the cultural habitus, becomes "familiar" and so, gradually, imperceptible. This process is equivalent to an injection of ideological meaning into the work: that is, the meaning of the "aesthetic object" is altered as its situation vis-à-vis the ideological field changes. The object of interpretation can therefore never be a static object, but can only be a process or a moment of literary evolution (and to suppose a fixed and objective signification or a "universal" value is to take at face value the illusory "second nature" into which the canonized work is inscribed).

As Brüggemann notes, the modes of legitimation are in each case historically variable; the area of dominant normalization will determine the direction of new production; but in all cases the impetus will be, whether or not the author is aware of it, intertextual: either a replication of the norm (establishing a continuity but not an aesthetic "value," since real aesthetic cognition is not possible within the framework of a neutralized form), or a break with the norm on the basis of the norm (establishing a discontinuity which is never a pure "originality," and necessarily involving a new mode of aesthetic
cognition). However, given that the literary norm is the result of an intervention of social factors in the "specifically literary" process of evolution, it now becomes possible to conceive of intertextuality as a phenomenon which simultaneously belongs to the purely literary order and relates to the "extra-aesthetic" order of ideology.

II. The "break" which is constitutive of a new mode of aesthetic cognition and of the self-renovation of the literary order, and which is, in fact, a process of contestation and criticality at various levels of the work, is always founded on difference, either overt, as in parody, or implicit: that is, the new product forces the recognition of its differential quality with respect to the old; it is not an absolute newness but an otherness, a determinate negation. Ideally, every word in the estranging text is vibrant with the multiplicity of automatized choices which have not been made. There are two consequences of this: (1) the presence of the shadow of the past order in the present text, endowing it with a temporal depth which is the basis of its essential historicity; (2) a manifest or latent reference to its differential quality (although this element of self-reflexivity will have different historical modalities, ranging from implicit reference to the canon to the programmatic "foregrounding" characteristic of the modern). Brecht speaks of the Verfremdungseffekt in very similar terms: the text is "laid bare" ("The shower is shown"), and it functions as a quotation (it "brackets" itself, refers reflexively to its own alienating activity); but this ironic suspension of itself within the space of quotation is also a removal of itself from the automatized second nature of the literary norm system.\footnote{12}

The historicity of the work is, however, even deeper than this immanence of the shadow of the past as a determinate moment of the present, this dialectic of time congealed and renewed. The new text is related also to the process of its future transformation: "A living work of art always oscillates between the past and future status of an aesthetic norm. The present, from which we observe the work of art, is felt as a tension between a former norm and its destruction, and the destruction is intended to become part of a future norm."\footnote{13} The exemplary status of Don Quixote for literary theory perhaps lies not so much in its treatment of the sacralized authority of Literature (and of the infiltration of literary into behavioral norms), as in the relation of the second to the first part of the novel: the recognition that the demystifying book has itself been assimilated into the magical-ideological realm it was undermining, has itself become the Law which must, endlessly, be contested.

This notion of literary evolution as a dialectic of typicality and
atypicality, of structure and event, should not be taken to imply that the time of literary evolution is cyclical. Such a conception becomes impossible once we realize that the direction of the break is indeterminate, unpredictable, and open-ended. Although the break is structured to a certain extent by the norm against which it reacts, it is never a simple reversal of the norm; rather, the fact that it is always a breakthrough out of a seemingly closed system guarantees the unpredictedness of its solution (however “natural” it will appear later: distance in time makes it increasingly less possible to understand the difficulty with which Donne broke with the Spenserian tradition, or Stendhal with the novel of Scott, or Kleist and Büchner with Weimar classicism). A dialectical theory of literary evolution will need, then, to reject the conception of historical movement as an evenly unfolding and integrated continuum, and to stress instead the relatively arbitrary nature of change. It will move away from thinking in terms of the directly meaningful nature of cultural material, and seek to understand, historically and concretely, the mediations through which it both corresponds and fails to correspond to more general structures of social development. And an understanding of this ambivalent status of new production, somewhere between socio-cultural motivation and arbitrariness, can lead us beyond a further weakness in Formalist theory. Just as structural linguistics has often been accused of seeing speech as a purely accidental and spontaneous act, the opposite of the “system” which is the sole bearer of history, so the Formalists tend to view the act of defamiliarization as an isolated, spontaneous, and therefore ahistorical occurrence in relation to the regularity and social congruence of the literary system. The alternative to this view is not necessarily to correlate the break with a contradictory social force (as, for example, in the classic theory of the “ascending class” as a force which shatters the ruling ideology) but to locate its historicity in its unity with the transcended norm and its integration in a speech situation which is always, indirectly, a power situation.

The choice of constructional elements (including thematic material) is always a choice within or against ideology, since all available devices are pre-invested with ideological value: they are rational/irrational, poetic/prosaic, orderly/disorderly, harmonious/inharmonious, in good/bad taste, archaic/modern, moral/immoral, high/low, etc. (the traditional discrimination of styles provides a good example of the investiture of purely formal options with prescriptive values vis-à-vis their ideological content). The intervention of the artist is thus political to the extent that his deconstruction of forms is a deconstruction of forms which have become ideologically assimilated and motivated, and which reflect
the authority of a social order; and our response to a text is always
directed to the level of automatization or defamiliarization which it
manifests, and so, ultimately, to its level of integration in the
hegemonic system of social relations. This comes fairly close to Jauss’s
concept of “aesthetic distance,” where the space between the new
work and the horizon of expectations (i.e., the system of ideological
and literary norms) is used as a measure of aesthetic value; and the
notion of the gradual appropriation and automatization of the new
work by the ideological institutions corresponds to Jauss’s theory of
the inevitable disappearance of aesthetic distance, as the original
negativity of the work becomes self-evident and predictable in the
horizon of future aesthetic experience.16 But it raises the question of
the very limited impact that any work can have on the accumulated
totality of literary norms. The answer to this must be formulated in
terms of T. S. Eliot’s thesis that the totality of norms is reproduced
and altered by every genuinely new work. Similarly, the synchronic
literary order contains all of the living works of the past insofar as
they are reactivated in the present. Thus a theory of literary evolu-
tion need not exclude the concept of the simultaneity of past and
present texts: it merely historicizes the way in which we can think of
this simultaneity. The synchronic literary field, then, is made up of
elements of different “ages,” of a non-contemporaneity of the
simultaneous; but the dominant force within this field will usually be
the norm established by the immediately preceding literary genera-
tion.

III. The process of literary evolution occurs in two contradictory
ways: discontinuously, through the production of the deviant text,
and continuously, through the reproduction of the literary norm. But
the categories of production and reproduction also have a broader
sense, which includes the technical basis of literary activity and its in-
tegration into the general structure of material and mental produc-
tion. The institutional function of literature within this structure is to
reproduce the symbolic order through which relations of production
are maintained, justified, and perpetuated; to “reinvest” cultural
capital, to add to it and redistribute it according to the given struc-
ture of social relations. The critical function of literature is to subvert
the symbolic order, to break the circle of social self-reproduction.
Provided we keep in mind that the system of literary production is
primarily a system of reproduction, there should be little difficulty in
correlating the moments of literary evolution with the social and
technical concept of a production process.
Marxist thought has consistently posited the theoretical unity of material and mental production; the discrimination between the two has been historically imposed by the capitalist organization of production, but both function effectively within the general framework of social production and reproduction. The distinction in fact conceals an increasingly greater unity, insofar as intellectual labor is integrated more and more fully into the process of commodity production. The ultimate organ of ideological assimilation is, then, the market overriding and constraining the ideological institutions proper (although there will of course be discrepancies between these and the "market" in the narrower sense of the word—the marketplace of books). The universality of commodity production in the capitalist period makes it essential that we think of literary production, not as an act of creation by a subject (whether individual or collective), but as a system of production and a "branch" of production in general. This system differs radically from precapitalist systems, perhaps most importantly in the separation which it introduces between the author and his audience, the fact "that 'writing to someone' has become 'writing.'" The complexity of the moments intervening between writer and reader—the publishing and publicity industries, the apparatus of distribution, etc.—confirms the abstractness of the relationship. In the face of this phenomenon, romantic-conservative distinctions between "technical" and "creative," commercial and non-commercial art, become untenable, a reactionary assertion of the privileged and exclusive character of the work of art. The relation of "high" to "low" art is a relation within the total system of aesthetic production, and it is into an analysis of this totality of production, with its "normal" and "exceptional" modes, that we must insert the analysis of any particular text. Further, our understanding of the technical aspects of literary development can better be illuminated if we take into account, not only the specifically literary system (the structured totality of texts), with its sub-genres and survivals and its own history of changing relations of dominance between genres, but also the more general communicative system into which it is inserted (the system of organized literary and non-literary modes and techniques of transmission of information), as well as the ideological system which subsumes them both. The reason for this is that it allows us to consider the influence of technical developments in other areas on literary development (e.g., the interconnection between pictorial perspective and the Renaissance stage, or between the printing process and the secular romance of the late Middle Ages). Historically, literary development has occurred above all by the evolution of genres and the displacement of established genres by newer genres;
but "in the age of mechanical reproduction" it is arguable that this intra-literary evolution has been profoundly modified by the development of non-literary media, above all film.\textsuperscript{21} The various branches of artistic production are more interdependent now than ever before, and this has radically altered both the hierarchy of aesthetic modes and the internal structure of traditional genres (e.g., by the incorporation of montage techniques into the novel). Technical innovation shares many of the features of the kind of ideological break which I have up till now discussed in terms solely of the contestation of normative generic features. The drama, where the function of a technical apparatus has always had greater importance than in other literary modes, provides the clearest examples of this: Aeschylus' introduction of the second actor, the development of the medieval stage and, later, of the proscenium arch, the agit-prop techniques of the early Soviet theatre, Piscator's use of film projection—all amount to genuine "defamiliarizations."

In the broadest sense, then, the literary system is a mode of production, a structure of functional relations in which there exists a hierarchy of genres,\textsuperscript{22} a constant modification of relations to other modes of artistic production—which in turn modifies the hierarchy—and a specific relationship to the audience. But in the twentieth century the literary system has undergone a restructuring of unparalleled rapidity, caused by the profusion of new artistic and communicative modes developed around the turn of the century. (I mentioned film, but the list would also include the radio broadcast, the news article in mass-circulation daily newspapers, the advertisement, pulp fiction and the types of narration corresponding to it, and audio-visual recording techniques.) All these are a direct result of the extension of the communications network by the expanding capitalist system, but their effect on literature takes place through their expansion of the number of modes of "literary" and narrative discourse, against the background of the "extraordinary persistence through the centuries, in European literature of a limited number of generic models . . . and of the places which these models occupied within generic systems."\textsuperscript{23} The systematic crisis caused by new modes of literary and quasi-literary production is in part no more than a quantitative effect—the enlargement of the cultural system to include new audiences—but this necessarily becomes a qualitative problem. On the one hand there is the threat posed to traditional modes of production by new and highly technical modes; Baudelaire wrote (Salon de 1859) of photography that, "When industry irrupts into the realm of art, it becomes its most mortal enemy. . . . [T]he confusion of functions prevents any of them being properly carried out."\textsuperscript{24} On the other
hand the new modes enormously accelerate the process of assimilation and automatization of "high" art, replacing the slower activity of the epigone: the "manner of epigones is forever being transformed from stylistic convention to technological and practical convention. In fact it becomes the style and language of commercial, popular and industrial art—in short, of mass culture." As techniques of reproduction the new modes detach the reproduced object from tradition, shatter its "aura"; the notion of tradition itself becomes suspect as the "high" forms are drawn into the process of commodity production. Technical innovation is thus inherently ambiguous, at least throughout the capitalist period; and this ambiguity is reflected in Benjamin's contradictory attitudes towards the "loss of aura." The real contradiction involved here is that between the development of potentially liberating forces of production, and their distortion by regressive relations of production. John Berger, writing about the visual arts, puts it this way:

What the modern means of production have done is to destroy the authority of art and to remove it—or rather to remove its images which they reproduce—from any preserve. For the first time, images of art have become ephemeral, ubiquitous, inessential, available, valueless, free. They surround us in the same way as a language surrounds us. They have entered the mainstream of life over which they no longer, in themselves, have power.

Yet very few people are aware of what has happened because the means of reproduction are used nearly all the time to promote the illusion that nothing has changed except that the masses, thanks to reproductions, can now begin to appreciate art as the cultured minority once did. Understandably, the masses remain uninterested and sceptical.

As Benjamin pointed out, art has always been reproducible, but the new modes of technical mass reproduction constitute a radical change in the system of dissemination of aesthetic information. On the one hand (as forces of production) they offer the possibility of a total desacralization of the art-work; on the other hand (as the concept of cliché, stereotype, Schablone indicates: the terms all refer to the printing process), they speed up and expand the process of automatization, so that (as long as the reproductive apparatus remains private property) they become a powerful tool for the appropriation and neutralization of the divergent new text, and for the reinforcement of the authority of the canon.

Insofar as technical innovations contribute to production rather than reproduction their effect is, according to Benjamin, threefold: they transform mechanical techniques (e.g., the nickelodeon) into aesthetic forms; they produce effects which had been imperfectly
achieved by the traditional forms; and they change the nature of our
reception of traditional forms. Unlike the essentially negative proc-
cess of norm-breaking through which literary evolution normally
takes place, they have an additional positive constructional function
with respect to the genre: that is, technical innovation seems to represen-
t a real progress in the development of literary "forces of production,"
rather than simply a change in direction. The temptation this offers
is to equate material and immaterial production, to see literary
evolution in terms of the development of the general productive
forces. Ultimately this can lead, as I think is the case with Benjamin,
to a fetishization of technology. An understanding of "technique" as
an autonomously developing force which is in itself progressive is only
the obverse of the romantic-reactionary rejection of the
"mechanical." More specifically, by assuming such an autonomous
process, Benjamin ignores the social functions served by the technical
apparatus, i.e., the dialectical process by which material techniques
are either consciously developed for specific functions, or, once
developed, are adapted and made to serve specific social ends. Brüg-
gemann's comparison of Benjamin's with Brecht's conception of
technique is instructive:

Brecht's understanding of literary technique is broader and more varied [than Ben-
jamin's] because he doesn't anchor the objective technical standard exclusively to
technological developments (reproducibility in the broadest sense as the material con-
dition of aesthetic production), but grasps it as a factor within the concrete totality of
a socio-economic formation, in the production and reproduction of which literary ac-
tivity plays a functional role.

The notions of literary production and reproduction must be kept
free, then, of the metaphoric identification of literary technique with
technological advance, and must be understood rather in terms of
social function.

Let me conclude this section by mentioning briefly two concepts
which seem to me to contribute to such an understanding. The first
is Benjamin's view of commodity production as production of the Im-
merwiedergleich, the eternal recurrence of sameness. The second is
Kubler's concept of replications, that is, the "entire system of
replicas, reproductions, copies, reductions, transfers, and derivations,
floating in the wake of an important work of art." Kubler
distinguishes between the non-identity of new products (which he
calls "prime objects") and the identity (a relative identity, imposed on
the underlying non-identity of the universe) of replicas. And this
distinction implies a temporal dialectic of aesthetic evolution:
Without change there is no history; without regularity there is no time. Time and history are related as rule and variation: time is the regular setting for the vagaries of history. The replica and the invention are related in the same way. . . . The replica relates to regularity and to time; the invention relates to variation and to history. \[1\]

The replica belongs to the regularity of commodity production; the invention breaks the cycle of reproduction.

IV. The fact of marked *epochal* style changes raises in an even more acute form the question of the relation between structural and superstructural change. In particular, can we guarantee that demarcation points in the two spheres will actually coincide, and even if this seems to be the case, isn't there a danger that the "cuts" will be made for the sake of this coincidence rather than because they reflect a clearly evidenced articulation of the historical and superstructural spectrums? The two polar theoretical possibilities here would be either to posit the organic self-sufficiency of stylistic change, so that each stylistic paradigm will obey necessary laws which dictate its "rise and fall," or else to reduce the stylistic break to a simple expression of a structural change in the socio-economic base. A third, synthetic possibility would equate these two by conceiving of the organic unity of the spiritual and social manifestations of an epoch as the determinant of the coincidence of their limits; but to suppose the homogeneity of the historical epoch means surrendering the moment of discontinuity which is indispensable for a dialectical conception of historical movement. A valid account of literary sequence must respect both the "relative autonomy" of the literary system and its constant integration into the structure of social power.

One difficulty for Marxist theory in this respect has been Marx's bold statement in *The German Ideology* that superstructural forms "have no history, no development"\[2\]; but to be properly understood, this statement must be read in the context of the anti-Hegelian thrust of the whole passage. Marx is arguing against the notion that history is moved by ideas, that its development is separate from that of socio-economic processes, and thus he is not denying the history of superstructural forms as such but only their separateness from social practice. A more useful formulation is perhaps Engels' contention that the illusion of autonomy is *constitutive* of ideology.\[3\] In bourgeois theory the argument for autonomy always carries the implication of the necessary apoliticality of art and its freedom from market relations. The concept of an intertextual evolutionary dynamic seeks to circumvent this implication by positing both the "relative autonomy" of the literary series and a *mediated* intertextuality,
in which the relation of work to work is primarily a relation of the
work to the automatized state of previous texts, that is, to the literary
norm system as a social fact.

This implies, further, the rejection of an organic conception of
literary development, since "it is not so much the old that dies as the
new that kills." But what are the structural constraints placed upon
development, if they are not those of an inner principle of formal
growth? Jauss has proposed (in a discussion of the diachronic structure
of genre) that for the metaphor of the organic cycle should be
substituted "the non-teleological conception of the playing-out of a
restricted number of possibilities." If, shifting our perspective slightly,
we think of the "work" as a productive transformation of raw material
(i.e., as a kind of work), then the limits of its function and of its
development will be determined both by the nature of the material it
elaborates (the particular mass of ideological values) and by the limited
number of technical features which are more or less pre-given for the
genre. This concept replaces that of an ontological determination of
formal structure, and it describes the (historically modified) bound-
daries set to the representational and critical potential of a genre.
The evolution of literary genres is therefore determined both
negatively, through the break with the automatized norm, and
positively, by the possibilities given in the formal genre features, the
limited set of alternatives open at any point.

But the notion of a "positive" determination must be qualified
in two ways. First, the formal and technical features of a genre are
not absolutely pre-given, and the parameters of development are
therefore not marked out from the beginning; rather, these features
are in most instances the result of previous development, a product of
the exclusions and prohibitions created by the growth of the series,
and of the possibilities of incorporation of new material, of refunc-
tionalization of formal elements, and of the discovery of new
technical bases. Second, the formal-technical features of the literary
genres—point of view, narrative structure, spatio-temporal categories,
number of "voices," the relations author-text, speaker-text, and
reader-text, and the number and kind of registers which can be
absorbed—are capable of immensely rich development, and the "time-
curve" of most literary modes is almost indefinitely long.

Thus, although we can posit a double (positive and negative)
determination of literary succession, we cannot speak, as Aristotle
does of tragedy, of the "fulness of its perfect form" or entelechy
with respect to any genre, nor can we posit the predictability of new
stages in the sequence. Furthermore, diachronic development will be
seen to be possible only through an intersection with the synchronic
literary field: this is represented by the dominant norm, but necessarily involves the "extra-literary" factors of the ideological field, the relation to an audience, social function, and relations of dominance within the total social structure.

A more formalist model of aesthetic succession, and in many ways a rather precise description of the operation of formal prohibitions, is that of George Kubler. Using, like Thomas Kuhn, a notion of "puzzle-solving" as the motive-force of aesthetic change, Kubler elaborates the idea of an interconnected succession of solutions to formal problems, which he calls "linked solutions describing early and late stages of effort upon a problem," and, because the sequence follows a definite path mapped out by the problem-structure peculiar to it, it is possible for Kubler to argue that "Every succession may be stated in the following propositions: (1) in the course of an irreversible finite series the use of any position reduces the number of remaining positions; (2) each position in a series affords only a limited number of possibilities of action; (3) the choice of an action commits the corresponding position; (4) taking a position both defines and reduces the range of possibilities in the succeeding position." Thus, "every new form limits the succeeding innovations in the same series." Aesthetic succession is therefore primarily a process of constructive development and then progressive entropy, and the diachronic sequence follows a "curve" corresponding to the logic of its predetermined potentialities and limits. This logic is purely immanent: "The idea of seriation . . . presupposes a structural order in the sequence of inventions which exists independently of other conditions." But Kubler also reinforces the notion of the finiteness of the series by adopting Göller's concept of "Formermündung" to explain the exhaustion of the possible new solutions, and this seems to suggest that the notion of an inherent structural order will inevitably be bound up with metaphors of the organic. Finally, Kubler posits a dialectical interchange between new production and the past canon, and this leads him to distinguish between the moments of production and of eventual assimilation (leading to further innovation). Innovation involves the obsolescence of prior positions in the sequence:

Yet prior positions are part of the invention, because to attain the new position the inventor must reassemble its components by an intuitive insight transcending the preceding positions in the sequence. . . . The technique of invention thus has two distinct phases: the discovery of new positions followed by their amalgamation with the existing body of knowledge."

I have quoted Kubler at some length because his theory seems to me
to clarify some of the strengths and weaknesses of a purely formalist historiography. Its basic failure is already implicit in the initial thesis that "the forms of communication are easily separable from any meaningful transmission," and hence "the structural forms [of art] can be sensed independently of meaning." The artificial separation of semantic and formal material distorts the functional integration of the two in the concrete system of the work; in isolation from this system formal elements become abstract and undifferentiated. Further, Kubler's supposition that the "shaped time" of a sequence is determinate and unilinear ignores the complexity of the factors involved at each point; we should ask rather to what extent there is not one line of development but multiple possible "solutions" at each stage, one of which is chosen (or invented), not in accordance with an immanent logic but as a "blind" negation of occupied (and automatized) positions. We would thus think of the "curve" as being displaced, deflected, and modified by its reaction to the dominant norm, and through this by the specific historical conditions of artistic production and distribution (and by the corresponding institutions), by interrelations with other art forms, by ad hoc renovations (e.g., the introduction of new material), by technical innovation, etc. The model of literary evolution as the working out of a calculus of possible forms presupposes a closed set of possibilities, and this can only partly be true (it is, above all, too technological a model). Diachronic development, which gives the appearance of being a purely internal process of change, should more accurately be described as the progressive sedimentation of a chain of synchronic interactions with other structures. More radically, we can argue that each period produces its own particular time, and that literary evolution is a bundle of such times rather than a sequence passing through a homogeneous frame.

The concept of "history" implies not just chronology, and not just abstract "change," and not necessarily the pattern of change, but changes in the structure of relations of power. Change in individual series (technology, art, the mode of production itself) are relevant only insofar as they influence social relations of production. The historicity of a literary text cannot lie in its immanent development; nor can it lie in isolated factors (form or content, context, the market, influence, reception, genesis) but only in the process which unifies these factors. This process is exemplified in that of ideologization and the breaking of the norm, because all other moments are explicable in terms of the social contact which takes place here, and in terms of the fusion of the literary and social series which occurs here. It is at this point that the dualism characteristic of literary theory can be
overcome, whereas the other factors taken separately place history outside the work or outside of the social context (and it is this dualism—or the eclecticism which "combines" the two aspects—which is so profoundly dissatisfying both in bourgeois and in orthodox Marxist theory).

V. Žirmunskij was one of the first to criticize the inadequacy of the Russian Formalists' view of literary change as a negative, reactional process, and to charge it with an inability to explain the direction of change. But his own explanation of literary development in terms of correspondence to new "world-views" reduces the work to a simply expressive function, and minimizes the systematic constraints through which development occurs. A more serious formulation of this criticism is Wellek's attack on the equation of aesthetic value with the evolutionary value of a work:

It is another attempt to arrive at values in a value-proof way. The very act of choosing the significant objects, however, implies value-judgements in relation to the whole scale of values, not merely the criterion of newness. We recognise newness only by constructing a series of development which judges a certain trait as valuable. History has to construct series. But which series? The answer can only be that it must show the essential changes, i.e., the new thing should not only be different, but must be by its very novelty important for the tendencies or value-concepts dominating a history of art. Mere newness may not be in any sense valuable or essential.

The demand that the constructed series show "the essential changes" restates Žirmunskij's demand for an explanation of the direction of change; and what this means, of course, is that the change must be shown to be motivated, to correspond to something beyond the literary series. We might have expected Wellek to require that the structure of the new work be shown to be positively correlated with social or class values; but he avoids this simple trap and walks into a more subtle one. The structure of the new product must have not only a negative but also a positive "importance," and this importance corresponds to the "tendencies or value-concepts dominating a history of art." But this is curiously circular, because it asks that the "tendencies or value-concepts" be used both to construct the series and to act as a standard for the series; such a history of art can only be an exercise in tautology.

The real difficulty doubtless lies in the very restricted sense that Wellek allows to the concept of ("mere") newness. It is a misreading of Russian Formalist theory to assume that this is equivalent to novelty or to technical innovation. Rather, the breaking of the dominant
literary norm system involves, as I have tried to demonstrate, a relation to the whole ideological field and the production of a "newness" the force of which lies precisely in its negativity. The Formalists' conception of the literary system, and their rejection of historicism and any simple historical holism, excludes a view of literary evolution as the working out of a pre-established pattern. Tynjanov and Jakobson make the point that, whereas an analysis of structural laws will permit "the establishment of a limited series of actually existing structural types (types of structural evolution)," it will not allow an explanation of "the tempo of evolution, or the chosen path of evolution when several, theoretically possible, evolutionary paths are given. This is owing to the fact that the immanent laws of literary (linguistic) evolution form an indeterminate equation; although they admit only a limited number of possible solutions, they do not necessarily specify a unique solution." The "direction" of change can only be established "by means of an analysis of the correlation between the literary series and other historical series." and this means inserting the literary system into a structure of complex determinations, not into an expressive totality. The alternatives that seem to be available to us, then, would be those of situating historical motivation (granted that we assume some degree of equivalence between a text and the social formation in which it is produced) either in the canonized conventions (as a moment of the ideological structure), or in the specific character of the new forms. But even insofar as the norm-breaking work constructs new semiotic patterns, new "myths," these are always structured against the canonic archetypes, and they become fixed and are endowed with a positive value only at the moment of their absorption into the system of norms. The second alternative thus seems uncontrollable except by metaphors of isomorphism, of "correspondence," i.e., except by an act of pure intuition, whereas the location of social value in the norm makes possible (but not "in a value-proof way") an evaluation which has a sociological validity.

Formal and thematic innovation or refunctionalization can never, then, be immediately "expressive" or "imitative" of changes in the structure of reality (or of an institutionalized awareness of them). They have no necessity which would correspond to a larger rationality of historical movement. The negative progression of the literary series is a discontinuous dialectic of formation and deformation; it is not even an "evolution" in the strict sense of the word, because this sense is based on a conception of the identity of the organism throughout its mutations, whereas social change is endless, has no point of "maturity," is not structured by a goal. The notion of "evolution" can only be useful
if we replace its connotation of biological time, which “consists of uninterrupted durations of statistically predictable lengths,” by historical time which is “intermittent and variable” and which includes the uneven intervals between “events.”

But we must ask how it is possible for the negative process of de-automatization to produce a “positive” cognition. I would argue here that the re-semanticization of formal and thematic elements leads to the production, not, arbitrarily, of any new meaning, but to one of three possibilities: (1) the only new meaning possible: but this is the historicist thesis, relying on the postulation of a pre-given meaning in the course of history; (2) the release of the multiplicity of meanings locked in the single authoritative meaning of the automatized word or structure: but this is formalistic, since it stresses the act of release itself rather than its content; or (3) a new meaning whose shape is determined by reaction to the structure of the norm system; thus, a meaning which exists as a negation and in the determinacy of its negation, not in the determinacy of a new positivity. In this case the cognitive value of the new work is qualitatively determined by the limits of the system of canonized norms; it never establishes a wholly new configuration of meaning, and can never do more than push beyond the norm or refunctionalize it. The “break” is never a clean break, and the text can never transcend ideology; it has a complex relationship to it, and its criticality can only ever be partial and itself historically conditioned. It is no objection to the cognitive value thus created to point out that the process remains within ideology (although negatively): the possibility of knowledge is given by the relative truth of ideology (its “historical validity”), and by the fact that, in a Marxist perspective, the categories of knowledge do not evolve towards a final “truth” but develop immanently in accordance with social determinations; that is, they are determined by social practice and the structure of relations of production, and their validity is expressed in terms of this, not in terms of an absolute and ahistorical “adequacy to reality.” The cognitive value of the break with the norm will therefore lie in the suspension of meaning between a past and a future norm, in a state of determinate cancellation which does not transcend itself and is always rooted, as “fiction,” in the cancelled “illusion.” This does not imply negation for its own sake, since an avantgardistic “originality” has no meaning once it is released from the state of tension linking the automatized structure to its breaking. But the ambivalence of this relation has no necessary influence on the content of the new work, as Kristeva seems to propose when she writes of Lautréamont that “dialogue and ambivalence prove to be . . . the only way for a writer to enter history professing an
ambivalent morality, that of negation as affirmation."48 Nor does it imply the indeterminate and purely formal openness which Eco—de-liberately developing Crocean categories—has propounded as the essence of aesthetic creativity, and which he relates to a conception of the simply idiolectal status of the new work.49 But one consequence which does seem to be indicated by the theory of the negative progression of the literary system is that the skeleton of the canon will always be present in the new product: as microcosm (the players’ scene in Hamlet); as a failure of style (Dickens’s lapses into sentimentality); or as the object of a philosophical digression (Tolstoy, Fielding). In all cases this skeleton will exist on various stylistic levels, and will be manifested both in its effects and in a tension which constantly strives to pull the work in contrary directions.

VI. At this point I need to introduce a substantial qualification of the model I have employed, by attempting to specify it historically. The model presupposes, first, a kind of aesthetic imperative which equates artistic integrity with opposition (usually on an implicit level) to the norms and values of the dominant class; and second, that all dominant classes depend upon the automatization of language in order to maintain their hegemony. These assumptions apply most completely only to the period of the capitalist mode of production, although they would also seem to have a more generalized validity for other periods. The question this raises is that of the relation between theory and the implicit modernist paradigm: to what extent is there not one mode of evolution but epochally different modes, each influenced by and influencing a current theory of production; and how are these theories themselves historical—how do they relate to general-historical models, and thus to the specific ideological structure of their period?

In order to qualify the model I have used, it is necessary to make an initial distinction between static and dynamic historical periods (i.e., between stable and dynamic economic structures), corresponding very roughly to the difference between oral and folk literatures and written literature. Secondly, we must posit an important break in the mode of literary production around 1800, when the "autonomization" of the arts (the result of a process set in motion by the introduction of printing, i.e., by the increasing absorption of literary production into commodity production) is decisively accelerated; it is here that the oppositional and contradictory nature of literary evolution becomes fully apparent, when the tempo of change becomes more rapid, and when the artist is released from his immediate ties to the patron class. Jauss, who had originally worked with a similarly univocal model of aesthetic distance, has recently tried to
construct a historical typology of the modes of literary activity. He distinguishes between a preformative and norm-giving stage, a motivating and norm-forming stage, and a transformative and norm-breaking stage. His claim is that aesthetic theory has largely ignored the implications of the second stage, in which there is both a stylistic evolution and a freedom on the part of the artist to transform the aesthetic norm, and yet an absence of aesthetic distance between the new work and the canon of norms. It would be possible, however, to argue that this second stage constitutes a transitional phase between two polar modes of aesthetic production (and that the transformation of aesthetic norms necessarily implies a latent distance between the writer and the general ideological system, although this is manifested solely on the aesthetic level). Lotman’s distinction between an “aesthetic of identity” and an “aesthetic of opposition” can perhaps serve to clarify this notion. The aesthetic of identity functions through a positive and constructive use of stereotypes, and through the confirmation of expectations; through a repetition of sameness on the basis of the difference of sameness; and through improvisation on the basis of strict rules. It would cover folklore, medieval art, commedia dell’arte, classicism—and, we could perhaps add, pulp-fiction, television shows (quiz-programs, serials), and spectacles (sport, religious rallies). The aesthetic of opposition is based on a concept of originality; on the breaking or absence of expectations; and on deconstruction rather than construction—on complication rather than simplification. It is not however a creation “without rules”: it works through the destruction of an habitual system, but not through the destruction or absence of the systematic itself.

Insofar as these can be seen as historical categories, we can posit that Jauss’s second stage (covering, roughly, written literature of the pre-bourgeois period) will contain elements of both aesthetics: both a respect for the structure of the canon, and a transformation of the canon which goes beyond a mere improvisation (the “battle of the books,” the “Querelle des anciens et des modernes,” marks, as Jauss has stressed, a decisive turning point in this phase of production). We could argue, for example, that in the medieval period it is the class-specific break between genres (e.g., between epic, romance, and novella) that carries the force of reaction to ideological conventions, whereas within the generic series development is likely to be constructive (the extension and elaboration of conventions). But obviously the precise historical process of transition needs to be examined in concrete detail, and this is beyond the scope of my intentions here. I would contend, however, that although the model I have used can be applied
rigorously only to the capitalist period, it is nevertheless relevant to the intermediate period as well.

The degree of oppositionality—and the extent to which literature, as a non-alienated linguistic praxis, can pass from a merely latent criticality to an open break with the hegemonic class—is dependent on the historically-variable kind of sanction given to the reproduction of norms and the strength of the taboos on their violation. It is equally dependent on the directness of the relation between the dominant class and the literary producer, and thus, eventually, on the particular structure of relations of production and the organization of the production process. Commodity production, which transforms relations of production into abstract and highly mediated relations, is the necessary precondition for the emancipation of the arts (although this also involves the virtualization of their authority and influence); it would be senseless to look for an oppositional function before the historical preconditions for it exist. A theory of the modes of literary production must therefore depend on an analysis of the specific place and function of literature within a complex and determinate social formation, and on its relations to other levels and to the particular play of social forces (including its own tradition). Literary theory is not Ideologiekritik but a knowledge of the dialectic set up between literature and ideology—a knowledge of conditions and functions. It forms a unity with literary history, and its descriptive categories are not separable from their content, but must adapt themselves to the structuredness of the material. “Every historical period has laws of its own”94; the concept of art itself changes from period to period, and theory must reflect and account for that change.

VII. One further question demands clarification: that of the limits of contestation in the ideological sphere. Since the symbolic order is one level of social relations of power, and since all moments of the structure are interrelated, to contest an ideological value is to threaten the structure of power relations at that level; contestation is most meaningful when it is focused on areas of high intensity (an attack on religious values has a different validity in Italy or Spain than in the United States), but no area of the semiotic field is ideologically neutral; we are aware of this, in an unsystematic manner, at the most minute levels of interpersonal behavior, where gesture, inflection, vocabulary, clothing, “life-style,” etc., inevitably betray a relation to the authority of social norms. Clearly, these are levels of relatively weak ideological intensity, but they are still active moments of the structure. But the real problem can be formulated in Tucholsky’s joke that “Because of
unfavourable weather conditions, the German Revolution took place in music."\textsuperscript{55} Granted the reaction of superstructural moments back upon the structure, and granted that class struggles are fought out in the superstructure, it is nevertheless difficult to grant any direct social effectiveness to the work of art (the few obvious exceptions—Uncle Tom’s Cabin, The Jungle—only confirm the rule). But the equation of the function of the work with direct effectiveness is misleading; the problem needs to be restated in terms of the unity of the different levels of social hegemony, and one of the tasks of theory will be to intervene in literary production, to stress the possible future unity of literary contestation with revolutionary practice.

Nevertheless, it is important that the limits of contestation be carefully defined. The concept of scandal which is inherent in Jauss’s theory of aesthetic distance, for example, needs to be treated with a great deal more caution, insofar as it describes a phenomenon which is historically limited and which has in the meantime become institutionalized, and insofar as it ignores a whole series of important problems: that of the relative degree of legitimacy of an art form; that of the conjuncture at which a formal innovation may take on the force of scandal; that of the relation between literary innovation and literary fashion; that of the rapid obsolescence demanded by commodity production; and that of the institutional control within which innovation occurs. This last factor has been crucial to the thinking of both Brecht and Benjamin. Brecht thinks of the theatre (the Apparat) as an economic institution which embodies the structural restraints of the social system insofar as there is a divorce between those who control the Apparat and those who produce for it.\textsuperscript{54} Theatrical innovation is relatively meaningless (or, at least, ambivalent) as long as the institutional framework itself remains constant (of Brecht’s plays only the Lehrstücke radically challenge, by their redefinition of the relation between spectators and actors and between theatrical and non-theatrical space, the form of the theatrical institution). And Benjamin applies the concept of the Apparat to institutionalized communication in general: he argues that within this framework, aesthetic distance is of secondary importance, and that to supply an institution of production without, as far as is possible, seeking to transform it, is a highly contestable procedure, even when the material with which this institution is supplied seems to be of a revolutionary kind . . . the bourgeois network of production and publication can assimilate and even propagate astounding quantities of revolutionary themes without thereby seriously threatening its own existence and that of the class which owns it.\textsuperscript{56}
This is obviously an understanding which is particularly relevant to the period of monopoly capitalism, where the neutralization of the deviant work is carried out by the mechanisms of repressive tolerance.

The whole contradiction between the contestatory and the legitimating functions of the work of art has been expressed with great clarity by Pierre Bourdieu. His thesis is that the work cannot be analyzed “in itself,” as a given or as a pure act of cognition, but only as a value within a class structure: as a token, the sign not of a meaning but of a struggle; it exists within and for the institutions of reproduction, and represents a cultural capital whose primary function is that of exclusion. That is to say that even the antagonistic will be appropriated insofar as it can never be wholly antagonistic (although we should note that this is a function of the exchange value of the work, a neutralization of its genuinely antagonistic moments).

If we wish, then, to speak of a cognitive and critical function of the literary product, and if we wish to regard judgments of value as being more than a matter of taste, two possible strategies remain available. The first (and this seems to be what Bourdieu does) would involve a rigorous compartmentalization of aesthetic and sociological judgment: qua aesthetic object, the work functions as a special kind of knowledge of the world; qua sociological fact it is rigorously subordinated to its institutional function and so lacks any cognitive value. The alternative possibility would be to equate the institutional function of the work (as cultural capital and as a symbolic weapon in the hands of the dominant class) with the moment of automatization, and to posit a (hypothetical) moment of freedom between the acts of production and appropriation. This is no more than a hypothesis, but if we are to avoid a sociologicist relativism which would deny any critical potential to the text commodity, it is the only way of explaining aesthetic value in terms that matter.

Even this second strategy recognizes the limited possibility of the criticality of a work in a class society, the fact that it is always determined by class control of the means of cultural production, and that it cannot by itself escape the ambiguities of its role; but this, in any case, is all that a Marxist analysis will want to say.

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NOTES


14. Michel Foucault, The Archaeology of Knowledge, p. 22. Let me note, in passing, Foucault's rejection of a bipolar model of antagonistic succession through the opposition of the norm and new creation: his argument is that the "new" is already inscribed in the general conditions of discourse; and that an "archaeology" of knowledge must be concerned, not with the alternation of regularity and irregularity, but with the systematic regularity of discursive practice (p. 215-20). It seems to me that it is precisely here that the dialectical moment of history escapes, and a very traditional
notion of epochal unity creeps back into Foucault’s thought: his theory cannot accommodate a conception of the unity of diachrony and synchrony. Obviously the new literary product is never \textit{radically} new, but it is \textit{other} than what was; it encroaches, however slightly, upon the excluded space of the inconceivable.


17. Cf. the recently published text by Marx, \textit{Resultate des unmittelbaren Produktionsprozesses} (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Neue Kritik, Archiv Sozialhistischer Literatur, 1969), where he develops the notion of a social “total laborer” embodying the labor-power of all (productive and “unproductive”) workers.


22. This hierarchy is based on a scale of legitimacy which constantly loses its upper register as newly legitimate genres—the novel in the nineteenth century, the \textit{conte} in the late Middle Ages—force their way in from below. Bourdieu gives a detailed table of relations of legitimacy at the present time in \textit{Un Art Moyen} (Paris: Ed. de Minuit, 1965), p. 136. It should be noted, however, that with the rise of a mass audience for the arts there now exists in fact a double standard of legitimacy, one “official” and one which is more truly legitimate—what Gans calls the upper- and lower-middle “taste-cultures” (Herbert J. Gans, “The Politics of Culture in America: A Sociological Analysis,” in \textit{Sociology of Mass Communications}, ed. D. McQuail [Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972], pp. 375, 378).


39. Ibid., p. 85.

40. Ibid., p. 64.

41. Ibid., p. vii.


44. I am assuming that Wellek means by this "the history which we write," because otherwise he is begging the question of the objectivity of "tendencies" and values in history.


54. Brecht, Notes to *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*, in *Schriften zum Theater* III, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 17, p. 1005.

