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Ideology and the Cultural Production of Gender

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The concept of ideology is an intractable one for Marxist feminism, not least because it remains inadequately theorized in both Marxist and feminist theory. Although feminists have frequently posed ideology as central to women's oppression this very centrality is presented as self-evident rather than argued for. This can be seen in an obvious way by considering one of the major fields of 'women's studies' — the analysis of literature. Much excellent work has been done on many aspects of this subject by feminists, and I shall be considering some of it later, but among it all I can find no sustained argument as to *why* feminists should be so interested in literature or what theoretical or political ends such a study might serve. Nor is it easy to find systematic accounts of any relationship between analysis of women's oppression in, say, literature and in, say, the family. Many women's studies courses are explicitly inter-disciplinary in perspective and yet the traditional disciplinary divisions between the 'arts' and the 'social sciences' have been difficult to transcend, other than by the juxtaposition of their respective subject-matters.

Related to this is the inadequacy of feminist attempts to explore the ways in which material conditions have historically structured the mental aspects of oppression. Some earlier feminist writers, Simone de Beauvoir and Virginia Woolf, for example, paid more attention to this question than it has received in recent years. Approaches taken by contemporary feminism seem in comparison

notably unsatisfactory. One solution has been to ground the ideology of oppression irrevocably in biology, to take procreation and its different consequences for men and women as the root cause. Another has been to present it as completely self-sustaining and in need of no further explanation; Cora Kaplan has suggested that this view of ideology — the 'energy source' of patriarchal domination — underlies Kate Millett's work.¹ Yet another solution has been found in the application of a particular Marxist perspective that sees ideology (in this case sexist ideology) as the reflection of material conditions of male power and dominance. Hence the ideology of women's inferiority is seen as a manipulation of reality that serves men's interests, and women's own collusion in oppression is explained as a variety of false consciousness. These solutions are all unsatisfactory, and the latter is particularly so in that it simply transposes an already inadequate theory of ideology on to different ground. For if a theory that sees ideology as the unproblematic reflection of class relations is inadequate, the difficulties are compounded if it is merely transferred to the question of gender.

Feminism has, however, played an important part in challenging the validity of the mechanical conception that sees ideology as the playing out of economic contradictions at the mental level. As I have already suggested, there has been a fruitful alignment of interests between those who seek to raise the question of gender and its place in Marxist theory, and those who seek to challenge economism in Marxism, insisting on the importance of ideological processes. It is clear that a conception of capitalism in which all forms of ideology are perceived as a reflection of the exploitation of labour by capital, in which gender plays no part, can be of little use to feminist analysis. It should be noted, perhaps, that the strong form of economism indicated above has never gained the hold on Western European Marxism that it has elsewhere. Indeed Perry Anderson has

1. Cora Kaplan, 'Radical Feminism and Literature: Rethinking Millett's *Sexual Politics*', *Red Letters*, no.9, 1979, p.7.

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argued that the political context of the twentieth-century development of Western Marxism has encouraged an exploration of culture and ideology at the expense of an insistence on the primacy of economic or political considerations.²

I

It is in this context that we should consider the argument that post-Althusserian developments in the theory of ideology offer an opportunity for feminist analysis which earlier versions of Marxism have denied. This claim can be identified with a particular tendency in contemporary feminist work, the appropriation of the theory developed by Barry Hindess and Paul Hirst, and is found most systematically in articles published by the journal *m/f*. It is not relevant here to enter into a sustained engagement with the ideas of Hindess and Hirst, which I will discuss only insofar as is necessary for an assessment of the claims made by feminists who have taken them over.³

As a basis for discussion I want to quote a passage of argument which expresses clearly the logic and assumptions of this theoretical position. 'My argument is that as long as feminist theories of ideology work with a theory of representation within which representation is always a representation of reality, however attenuated a relation that may be, the analysis of sexual difference cannot be advanced because reality is always already apparently structured by

2. Perry Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism*, London 1976.
3. The individual and collaborative works of Barry Hindess and Paul Q. Hirst, and their collective work with Anthony Cutler and Athar Hussain, are known colloquially as 'Hindess and Hirst', 'post-Althusserianism' and 'discourse theory'. There now exist several general critical responses to their arguments, such as Andrew Collier, 'In Defence of Epistemology', in vol.3 of *Issues in Marxist Philosophy*, John Mepham and David-Hillel-Ruben, eds., Brighton 1979; Laurence Harris, 'The Science of the Economy', *Economy and Society*, vol.7, no.3, 1978 (and see the subsequent debate in vol.8, no.3, 1979); Philip Corrigan and Derek Sayer, 'Hindess and Hirst: A Critical Review', *The Socialist Register*, 1978.

sexual division, by an already antagonistic relation between two social groups. And thus the complicated and contradictory ways in which sexual difference is generated in various discursive and social practices is always reduced to an effect of that always existent sexual division. In terms of sexual division what has to be explained is how reality functions to effect the continuation of *its* already given divisions. (The different ways in which sexual differences are produced is actually denied as a political fact in this position.) In terms of sexual *differences*, on the other hand, what has to be grasped is, precisely, the *production* of differences through systems of representation; the work of representation produces differences that cannot be known in advance.⁴ I will come back later to the political implications of this argument. For the moment, consider the rather startling statement that sexual differences 'cannot be known in advance'. Let us not sink to the vulgarity of pointing out that biological differences can be known in advance, since we know that this level of reality is uncongenial to exponents of this approach. More seriously, this analysis of 'social and discursive practices' appears also to deny that *gender* differences, as a set of historically constructed and systematic categories, can be predicted with any confidence within a given historical conjuncture. Underlying this argument are a series of principles which need to be examined. These can be identified (rather negatively perhaps) as (i) a rejection of theories of ideology; (ii) a denial that there is any knowable relationship between representation and that which is represented; (iii) an insistence that functionalist formulations are always and necessarily incorrect.

Ideology

It is clear that a position resting on a rejection of epistemological theories must inevitably reject any elements of determination in its approach to ideology. Paul Hirst, in a

4. Parveen Adams, 'A Note on the Distinction Between Sexual Division and Sexual Differences', *m/f*, no.3, 1979, p.52.

critique of Althusser, points to the 'fragile' character of the thesis that ideology is 'relatively autonomous' of its supposed economic determinants. He argues that the notion of relative autonomy 'attempts to overcome economism without facing the theoretical consequences of doing so'. On the face of it, such a criticism might point to an espousal of the view that ideology is 'absolutely' autonomous. But this turns out to be a naive or wilful misreading of the text. 'Autonomy from what?', asks Hirst rhetorically, insisting that even to pose questions of causality is to assume a social totality in which particular instances are governed by their place in the whole.⁵ This enlightenment induces distaste for the concept of ideology itself, and a preference for that of 'discursive practices'. As the editors of *m/f* emphasize: 'it is indeed *theories of ideology* that present the categories of men and women as exclusive and exhaustive'.⁶ This is certainly a stylish way of dealing with the problem. But I think we have to ask whether in following it we really have shaken the mundane dust of ideology off our feet. We have, after all, been led through a series of increasingly radical breaks with the Marxism of Marx and Althusser, and the final transcendence of the epistemological problematic of 'ideology' is built on the earlier advances made within this framework. In particular, the way in which the concept of discursive practice is deployed owes much to previous attempts to demonstrate the autonomy and materiality of ideology. To put this another way: they have shifted the discourse of ideology onto the terrain of the discourse of discourse and while in their terms this may be as real an advance as any other, to the critic of discursive imperialism it may seem a nominal rather than a conceptual gain. For this reason I want to take issue with a tenet which (although an epistemological one and therefore rejected by discourse theory) has provided for many people the stepping stone to

5. See Paul Q. Hirst, 'Althusser and the Theory of Ideology', *Economy and Society*, vol. 5, no. 4, p. 395; *On Law and Ideology*, London 1979, p. 18.

6. *m/f*, no. 4, 1980, p. 23.

support for the more radical position: the 'materiality of ideology'.

This tenet is now so much *de rigueur* in the British Marxist avant-garde that to be caught artlessly counterposing 'material conditions' and 'ideology' is an embarrassing error — 'but surely ideology *is* material' will be the inevitable reproof. Yet this assumption will not withstand closer investigation. The insistence that ideology *is material* arises, I suspect, from an unsuccessful attempt to resolve a classic paradox in Marxism: that being may determine consciousness but revolutionary transformation of the conditions of being will depend upon raising the level of class-consciousness. Virginia Woolf once said 'a republic might be brought into being by a poem' and indeed it is possible, if unlikely, that a powerfully-wrought poem could goad an exploited proletariat into successful seizure of the means of production. Yet however colossal the material *effects* of this poem, they would have no bearing on the question of whether the poem itself had a material existence.

To reject the view that ideology is material does not imply a retreat to the view that the economic and the ideological are related in a one-way system of determination of the latter by the former. On the contrary, it is important to stress a degree of reciprocity here. It is impossible to understand the division of labour, for instance, with its differential definitions of 'skill', without taking into account the material effects of gender ideology. The belief that a (white) man has a 'right' to work over and above any rights of married women or immigrants has had significant effects in the organization of the labour force. Such a belief has therefore to be taken into account when analysing the division of labour, but its location in material practices does not render it material in the same way.

The argument turns on what might be seen as an extension of Althusser's approach to ideology. For while Althusser argues, in my view correctly, that ideology exists *in* (material) apparatuses and their practices it requires a considerable leap of faith to translate this as meaning that

ideology is material. Stuart Hall and Richard Johnson have made this point very clearly: Johnson suggests that a 'genuine insight' here becomes 'reckless hyperbole' and Hall argues that the 'slide' from one meaning to the other enables 'the magical qualifier, "materialist"' to serve as an undeserved emblem of legitimation.⁷

The notion of the materiality of ideology has been influential and has reinforced the claim that ideology should be regarded as absolutely autonomous. For why, if ideology is as material as the economic relations we used to think of as 'material conditions', should it not be assigned an equal place in our analysis? The crucial questions concerning the relationship of ideological processes to historical conditions of the production and reproduction of material life are left unexamined in this attempt to colonize the world for a newly privileged concept of ideology in which everything is material. Yet in drawing the net of ideology so wide we are left with no means, no tools, for distinguishing anything. As Terry Eagleton trenchantly remarks, 'there is no possible sense in which meanings and values can be said to be "material", other than in the most sloppily metaphorical use of the term... If meanings are material, then the term "materialism" naturally ceases to be intelligible. Since there is nothing which the concept excludes, it ceases to have value'.⁸

Representation

Parveen Adams argues that 'the classical theory of representation' must be rejected. What would such a rejection entail? This classical theory, central to Marxist aesthetics, poses representation (usually seen as ideological,

7. Richard Johnson, 'Histories of Culture/Theories of Ideology', in *Ideology and Cultural Production*, Michèle Barrett, Philip Corrigan, Annette Kuhn and Janet Wolff, eds., London 1979, p.59; Stuart Hall, 'Some Problems with the Ideology/Subject Couplet', *Ideology and Consciousness*, no.3, 1978, p.116.

8. Terry Eagleton 'Ideology, Fiction, Narrative', *Social Text*, forthcoming 1980.

and often explored through the analysis of cultural products) as to some degree a reflection of specific historical conditions. Debate has raged over whether literary texts, for instance, can be understood as direct reflections, or even distortions, of reality or should be seen as mediated in complex ways. Such texts are held, however, always to bear *some* relation to the social relations in which they were produced. It is this relationship that is being challenged here. Paul Hirst, in the critique of Althusser already mentioned, has argued that representation must necessarily entail *means of* representation and that once these are allowed it must follow that they 'determine' that which is represented. It is but a step from this to argue that *nothing other* than the means of representation determine what is represented — that 'the real' can never exist prior to its representation. This short step, however, constitutes an important break in the argument. For while it is true, as Hirst argues, that the signified does not exist (in semiotic theory) prior to its signification, this does not rule out the existence of a material referent of the sign as a whole. So Hirst's preference for the conceptual framework of signification over that of representation, and his claim that the former facilitates a break with the constraints of the classic theory of ideology, remain unjustified.

Certainly it is true that the means of representation are important. In the area of cultural production, for example, it is easy to see how forms of representation are governed by genres, conventions, the presence of established modes of communication and so on. Yet these are not determining in the absolute sense being argued for here. They do not in themselves account for what is represented. We can approach this problem by way of an example, by looking at the imagery of gender. Suppose I am an enterprising motor-car manufacturer, and it occurs to me that I can tap a market of independent salaried women for my product. I advertise my car with a seductive, scantily-clad male model draped over its bonnet and an admiring, yet slightly servile, snappily-dressed man politely opening the car door for my

putative client. Will my efforts be crowned with success? It is unlikely — and the reason why it is unlikely is, precisely, that representation *does* bear a relation to something which we can know previously existed.

This point is explored in two interesting articles on the imagery, and cultural stereotyping, of gender. Griselda Pollock argues that we should not be content to view the cultural representation of gender as 'images of women'. She rejects this approach because it cannot explain why it should be that the inversion or reversal of accepted imagery simply does not succeed.⁹ This is so not only because the representation of women is linked to a broader chain, or system, of signification. It also occurs because representation is linked to historically constituted real relations. To put the matter simply, we can understand why female models may be more persuasive to male customers than *vice versa* only if we take account of a prior commoditization of women's bodies. Why this should have been so, and how, are clearly questions for historical analysis, but the fact remains that a connection has been established in which not only have women's bodies become commodities themselves (for instance in prostitution) but the association between them and consumerism has more generally taken hold. A related case is made by T. E. Perkins in a discussion of stereotyping.¹⁰ Perkins argues that however irrational or erroneous a particular stereotype may be thought, we do not have the option of eradicating it by the voluntary substitution of a different one. Stereotypes are tied to historical social relations, and indeed, Perkins argues, the chances of success in challenging a stereotype will depend upon the social location of the group in question.

To argue in this way does not imply any pre-given, or ahistorical, content of representation. Parveen Adams appears to be arguing that *either* we talk of 'sexual division'

9. Griselda Pollock, 'What's Wrong With Images of Women?', *Screen Education*, no.24, 1977.

10. T. E. Perkins, 'Rethinking Stereotypes', in *Ideology and Cultural Production*.

as 'an always already antagonistic relation between two social groups who are frozen into a mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive division',¹¹ or we talk of 'sexual differences' as the apparently spontaneous production of something that we cannot know in advance. These, however, do not constitute our only options. We do not need to talk of sexual division as 'always already' there; we can explore the historical construction of the categories of masculinity and femininity without being obliged to deny that, historically specific as they are, they nevertheless exist today in systematic and even predictable terms. Without denying that representation plays an important constitutive role in this process we can still insist that at any given time we can have a knowledge of these categories prior to any particular representation in which they may be reproduced or subverted.

Functionalism

It is clearly true that the problem of functionalism has been a serious one for Marxist feminism. Both feminist and Marxist accounts of women's oppression have tended to slide uncritically into a mode of explanation which is undeniably functionalist; many feminist accounts explain various forms of oppression in terms of their supposedly self-evident functions of perpetuating patriarchal dominance, and many Marxist accounts centre on the supposed benefits, or functions, for capital of women's subordinate position. These forms of functionalism, and arguments derived from functionalist sociology, have undoubtedly been influential in many Marxist feminist explanations too.¹² Clearly any account of women's oppression that is organized around its importance for the smooth reproduction of capitalist social relations must run the risk of over-emphasizing this

11. *m/f*, no.3, p.57.

12. The problem is addressed explicitly by Mary McIntosh in 'The State and the Oppression of Women' (in Annette Kuhn and AnnMarie Wolpe, eds., *Feminism and Materialism*, London 1978).

supposedly functional relationship at the expense of a proper consideration of contradiction, conflict and political struggle.

Dissatisfaction with these accounts must lie behind the appeal of the alternative approach now being discussed. Criticism of the notion of function is a central point of their attack. Adams castigates the uncritical use of the term 'sexual division' for enabling merely a description of pre-given functions.¹³ Coward suggests that the entire debate as to the profitability or otherwise of the family for capitalism can be 'cleared away' by posing the problem in terms of particular conjunctures in which specific conditions of existence of the relations of production are secured.¹⁴ This approach draws on the rejection (by Hindess and Hirst) of general entities such as 'the capitalist mode of production' and the equally firm rejection of any 'necessary correspondence' between economic and ideological relations. It relies, in fact, on the assumption of a 'non-correspondence' — on the pre-given impossibility of establishing such relations or correspondences. This case is not however proven, even in its own terms, for if the notion of 'necessary correspondence' is invalid so also must any notion of 'necessary non-correspondence' lapse into dogmatism. The notion of 'difference' merely assumes the role of that which is 'always already' there, and is equally unjustified.

More importantly, the argument is predicated upon a caricature of the position it seeks to reject. Analyses couched in terms of modes of production, even in terms of proposed functional relations within these modes, need not *necessarily* fail to grasp the centrality of contradiction and struggle. Richard Johnson has argued that we may usefully return to Gramsci's conception of capitalist reproduction: 'a hard and constantly resisted labour, a political and ideological work for capital and for the dominant classes, on very obstinate materials indeed'.¹⁵ Such a view is not only

analytically sounder than the one I have been discussing, it is grounded in a more fruitful political context. Here it may be useful to consider briefly the political implications of the feminist application of discourse theory. This is particularly important since although these writers do spell out quite openly the political consequences of their position, the language in which the debate is cast is so impenetrable that relatively few critics have so far engaged with it.

First, insofar as a knowledge of real social relations is denied, it must follow that discourse itself must be the site of struggle. We do not even seek a cultural revolution; we seek a revolution in discourse. I do not want to deny either the importance of ideological struggle or the role of discourse within it (indeed it would be hard to see why I was writing this book if I did). However, there is a world of difference between assigning some weight to ideological struggle and concluding that no other struggle is relevant or important. The relief with which the intellectual left has seized upon these ideas as a justification and political legitimation of any form of academic work is in itself suspicious and alarming. For although I would not dispute the political significance of such activity, a distinction must be retained between this form of struggle and the more terrestrial kind. Are we really to see the Peterloo massacre, the storming of the Winter Palace in Petrograd, the Long March, the Grunwick picket — as the struggle of discourses?

The exclusive emphasis placed on discursive practice has led to a critical consideration of the discourse of feminism itself. In some respects this is both proper and valuable, since the language in which feminist demands are expressed must be constructed with care and integrity. Political slogans, for instance, inevitably aim at popular mobilization and may do so at a cost of oversimplification or compromise. Yet the critique of feminist slogans elaborated in successive articles in *m/f* is surely politically inappropriate to the point of being destructive. One by one the campaigning slogans of women's liberation — *the personal is political, a woman's right to choose, control of our bodies* — are found to rest on errors of

13. *m/f*, no.3, p.52.

14. *m/f*, no.4, p.92.

15. 'Histories of Culture/Theories of Ideology', p.74.

epistemology. They rely on humanism, essentialism, inadequate theories of the subject and so on.¹⁶ This critical exercise is in my view misplaced, in that it rests on a failure to appreciate the grounding of such slogans in particular historical struggles. More importantly, perhaps, it leads us to ask what alternative political strategy is being offered if we take seriously the post-Althusserian critique of traditional ways of perceiving women's oppression.

I find the political purchase of this approach particularly negative here. If we take, for instance, the question of whether feminist demands are reformist or not we find Rosalind Coward asserting that 'there can no longer be any distinction between reformist and revolutionary activity...'.¹⁷ It may very well be that received socialist truth on this question needs to be challenged, but this cannot be done by dismissing the problem in such a cavalier way. At the least, to do so manifests a refusal to engage with a salient area of current political debate. Fundamentally, it is unclear that the project to deconstruct the category of woman could ever provide a basis for a feminist politics. If there are no 'women' to be oppressed then on what criteria do we struggle, and against what? The difficulty here is to see the connection between the theoretical project and its stated designation as 'feminist'. The feminism enters as an act of ethical goodwill rather than a political practice tied to an analysis of the world; it remains a 'self-evident' and unexplained goal which in fact the theoretical consequences of discourse theory must systematically undermine.

II

I have discussed these arguments at some length, since they are proposed as a solution to the crucial question faced by

16. See Parveen Adams and Jeff Minson, 'The "Subject" of Feminism', *m/f*, no.2, 1978; Beverley Brown and Parveen Adams, 'The Feminine Body and Feminist Politics', *m/f*, no.3, 1979.
17. *m/f*, no.2, p.94. Although I have cited this article more than once as an admirably clear exposition of the feminist appropriation of discourse theory I am not implying that Coward's work as a whole is limited to the parameters defining this project. On the contrary.

Marxist feminist analysis — what is the relationship between women's oppression and the general features of a mode of production? I am unconvinced that the post-Althusserian development of discourse theory has rendered this question obsolete. These writers have, however, usefully alerted us once again to the underdeveloped nature of the theory of ideology, and in the following section I will attempt to sketch out a more useful way of deploying this concept.

I want to suggest first that for a concept of ideology to have any analytic use it must be bounded. We must retrench from a position where ideology is claimed to be as determining, as material, as the relations of production. The concept of 'relative autonomy' must, whatever its apparent fragility, be further explored and defined. This need not necessarily involve intellectual acrobatics of the kind which would be required to prove that ideology is at one and the same time autonomous and not. To perceive this problem in terms of abstract logic is to misunderstand it. What it does involve is the specification, for a given social historical context, of the limits to the autonomous operation of ideology. Hence we should be able to specify what range of possibilities exist for the ideological processes of a particular social formation, without necessarily being able to predict the specific form they may take.

Second, I want to restrict the term to phenomena which are mental rather than material. Hence the concept of ideology refers to those processes which have to do with consciousness, motive, emotionality; it can best be located in the category of *meaning*. Ideology is a generic term for the processes by which meaning is produced, challenged, reproduced, transformed. Since meaning is negotiated primarily through means of communication and signification, it is possible to suggest that cultural production provides an important site for the construction of ideological processes. Thus, it is not inappropriate to claim, as Eagleton and others have, that literature (for instance) can usefully be analysed as a paradigm case of ideology in particular social formations.¹⁸ Ideology is embedded historically in material

practice but it does not follow *either* that ideology is theoretically indistinguishable from material practices *or* that it bears any direct relationship to them. We may learn much, from an analysis of novels, about the ways in which meaning was constructed in a particular historical period, but our knowledge will not add up to a general knowledge of that social formation. For if literature does constitute a primary site of ideological negotiation, nonetheless it cannot provide the historian with an adequate knowledge of other, equally important aspects of a social formation. The mediation of social reality operating in any fictional work will ensure that the historian will face many dangers in pillaging literature for its 'social content'. One reason why this should be so is that literary texts operate, as Pierre Macherey has argued, through their absences as well as through what is present in them.¹⁹ Following Althusser's method of 'symptomatic reading', in which the analyst can supposedly detect the gaps and weaknesses of the author's original problematic, Macherey suggests that we should concentrate not on what the text overtly presents to us, but on what is *not said* in it. There are clearly problems with this model, which I shall come back to later, but Macherey points to an important danger here.

Third, lest it should be thought this represents a return to an economistic base/superstructure model of society, I should emphasize the integral connection between ideology and the relations of production. This is particularly important and easily demonstrated, in the case of the ideology of gender. As I shall argue later, this ideology has played an important part in the historical construction of the capitalist division of labour and in the reproduction of labour power. A sexual division of labour, and accompanying ideologies of the appropriate meaning of labour for men and women, have been embedded in the capitalist division of labour from its beginnings. It is impossible to over-emphasize here the importance of an historical analysis. I

make no claim for the inevitability of this particular ideology as a functional requisite for capitalist production — it is one of several possible options. Nevertheless there are grounds to accept a point made by Colin Sumner in his fascinating and controversial book: that once such an ideology is historically embedded it may *become* essential for the maintenance of the system.²⁰

In stressing the role of ideology in the relations of production it is perhaps necessary, to avoid misunderstanding, to stress the fact that the term 'relations of production' does not refer simply to class relations. It must comprise the divisions of gender, of race, definitions of different forms of labour (mental, manual and so on), of who should work and at what. Relations of production reflect and embody the outcome of struggles: over the division of labour, the length of the working day, the costs of reproduction. Marx's allusion to the 'historical and moral element' in the value of labour-power requires further exploration and elaboration. It is, perhaps, useful here to distinguish between the 'relations of production', in which the ideology of gender plays a very important part, and the means and forces of production. For while it is true that the ideology of gender plays a very significant role in the *relations* of production, it is far more difficult to argue that it plays a crucial part in the essential reproduction of raw materials, installations and machinery; and although domestic labour is vital to the present form in which labour power is reproduced, this need not necessarily be the case. Indeed it can plausibly be argued that the wage-labour relation and the contradiction between labour and capital — the defining characteristics of the capitalist mode of production — are 'sex-blind' and operate quite independently of gender.

III

I want now to discuss the ways in which the ideology of gender is produced and reproduced in cultural practice. Much

18. Terry Eagleton, 'Ideology, Fiction, Narrative'.
 19. Pierre Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production*, London 1978.
 20. Colin Sumner, *Reading Ideologies: An Investigation into the Marxist Theory of Ideology and Law*, London 1979.

of the discussion will relate to the question of literature, since this is a practice which has generated considerable work in this area, and is the practice most familiar to me, but parallels with other forms will be drawn where possible. I shall look first of all at the question of what we need to consider if we want to arrive at a systematic analysis of gender ideology. This is important, since much of the work so far undertaken has concentrated disproportionately on describing *how* gender is presented — ‘what images of women are portrayed?’ is the commonest question — and has not sought to locate this in a broader theoretical framework. So it will only be after considering the *context* of this imagery that I shall attempt to draw out the dominant themes of gender imagery in contemporary cultural practice. Finally, I shall consider the political potential of cultural production, returning to the question of whether a revolution at the level of culture is possible or adequate.

The first point to make in considering the necessary elements of an analysis of gender ideology in cultural production cannot be stressed too strongly: we must avoid making the text itself our only basis for analysis. In rejecting this approach, we should be clear that we are not only rejecting the tradition of literary criticism which has constantly insisted that the text ‘speaks for itself’: we are also rejecting the apparently more sophisticated ‘structuralist’ analyses that have tended to replace conventional literary and other criticisms. To restrict our analysis solely to the text itself is to turn the *object* of analysis into its own means of explanation; by definition this cannot provide an adequate account. To reduce the problem solely to the text is a form of reductionism as unprofitable as reducing it to the mechanical expression of economic relations. As I and others have argued elsewhere, this reduction to the text ‘simply privileges the artefact itself, divorced from its conditions of production and existence, and claims that it alone provides the means of its own analysis’.²¹

21. ‘Representation and Cultural Production’, in *Ideology and Cultural Production*, p.11.

To avoid this form of reduction we have to move away from a dependence upon our ‘reading’ of the text. This is far more difficult than it might appear. The history of both bourgeois and materialist criticism is rooted in the struggle for a ‘correct’ reading. In bourgeois criticism this takes the form of posing moral and aesthetic questions to which the critic, depending on his or her own sensitivity, will produce more or less satisfactory answers. The text has sometimes here been seen as potentially providing answers not only about its own construction (characterization, narrative and so on) but to larger questions about ‘human nature’ or ‘beauty’. This approach is criticized by Marxist and feminist critics. They tend to ask instead, ‘what does my reading of this text tell me about’ class consciousness, or responses to industrialization, or sexism, or whatever. But the argument is still posed in terms of a subjective reading: *you* may read this text as ‘about’ human nature, *I* read it as ‘about’ capitalism or patriarchy. Nor is this debate really resolved by trying to look for what the text does not say, as a means for reading what it is ‘about’. As Colin Sumner has argued, this (neo-structuralist) technique relies heavily on introspection.²²

If we are to get beyond basing our analysis on a reading of the text we need to construct a theoretical framework in which these broader questions are built into the method. This project is at a very early stage as yet, and perhaps the most systematic attempt to develop the constituent elements of such an approach is that provided by Terry Eagleton’s ‘categories for a materialist criticism’.²³ Eagleton suggests that the text should be understood as the product of the ‘complex historical articulations’ of various structures, and proposes the following schema:—

- (i) General mode of production
- (ii) Literary mode of production
- (iii) General ideology
- (iv) Authorial ideology

22. Sumner, p.172-3.

23. Terry Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology*, London 1976.

- (v) Aesthetic ideology
- (vi) Text

These categories, although somewhat unwieldy, are a major advance on the unformulated methods of materialist criticism that Eagleton has attempted to synthesize. They constitute a useful set of related structures which can profitably be used as a general framework in which to develop specific analyses. I do not want to discuss them in detail here, but will comment briefly on only one of these categories: the 'literary mode of production'.

I am not convinced that it is necessary or profitable to elevate the forces and relations of literary production to the status of a 'mode of production'. Nonetheless, in adopting this term Eagleton creates an opportunity to explore in very fruitful ways the specifically literary constraints in which a text is historically produced. Although Eagleton does not totally displace the centrality of the text, his account does by definition constitute an attack on the idealist view that 'art' can transcend its conditions of production. Eagleton's literary mode of production is constituted by forces and relations of production, distribution, exchange and consumption. Any given period may have residual features of earlier literary modes of production, or may contain forms prefiguring later modes, but will be characterized by a dominant mode which exerts specific determinations on the text to be produced. Analysis of these processes would take into account the stage of the development of the forces of literary production (an obvious example being the effects of the invention of printing) and the relations in which work was produced (different forms of patronage and so on). In addition to this Eagleton argues that such an analysis would be essential to grasp the meaning of the text. The material conditions of its production are internalized: 'every literary text intimates by its very conventions the way it is to be consumed, encodes within itself its own ideology of how, by whom and for whom it was produced'.²⁴ We can conclude

24. *Ibid.*, p.48.

from this that if women are situated differently from men in respect of the forces and relations of literary production, we might expect to see this internalized in texts — and we do.

IV

In arguing for a more systematic approach to the ideology of gender, we can isolate three specific elements in the process. These I shall refer to by the shorthand terms of production, consumption and representation, and I shall deal first with the question of *production*.

It is immediately clear that the conditions under which men and women produce literature are materially different. This important question has been curiously neglected by recent feminist work, and the most systematic exploration of this issue is still, fifty years after its publication, Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*.²⁵ Naive as this essay undoubtedly is in some respects, it nonetheless provides us with a very useful starting-point. Woolf bases her arguments in this book and in related essays on materialist propositions.²⁶ Writing, she argues, is not 'spun in mid-air by incorporeal creatures': it is based on material things (health, money, the houses we live in). These material conditions must govern the writer's 'angle of vision', his or her perception of society. They must influence the art-form chosen, the genre chosen within the form, the style, the tone, the implied reader, the representation of character.

Woolf argues that a crucial difference between men and women has lain historically in the restricted access of the latter to the means of literary production. Their education was frequently sacrificed to that of their brothers; they lacked access to publishers and the distribution of their work; they could not earn a living by writing as men did, since (before the Married Women's Property Acts) they could

25. Harmondsworth 1970 (first published in 1929).

26. A selection of these may be found in Virginia Woolf, *Women and Writing*, London 1979.

not even retain their earnings if they were married. Relative poverty and lack of access to an artistic training meant that the bourgeois woman encountered specific constraints on her creative work: Woolf suggests that one reason why women have been so prolific in literary production and almost absent from forms such as musical composition and visual art is that the latter require greater financial resources than 'the scratching of a pen' ('For ten and sixpence one can buy paper enough to write all the plays of Shakespeare. . .'). Less plausibly and more controversially, she argues that even the choice of literary form was affected by women's social position: they opted for the new form of the novel rather than for poetry or drama, since it required less concentration and was therefore more compatible with the inevitable interruptions of household obligations.

A strength of Woolf's analysis is that her discussion of representation is located in an analysis of both the historical production and distribution of literature and its social consumption and reception. She argues that accepted social and literary-critical attitudes that denigrated women's writing played an important part in influencing the production of literature by women. They did this not only by forcing women writers to adopt male pseudonyms in order to get their work published and neutrally assessed, but by engendering an over-aggressive or over-defensive tone in women's writing. She refers here to what the Marxist-Feminist Literature Collective now call 'gender criticism': the approach that 'subsumes the text into the sexually-defined personality of its author, and thereby obliterates its literarity'.²⁷

Although Woolf's account is more systematic than most, we still await a substantial account of *consumption* and reception of texts from the point of view of the ideology of gender (or from any other point of view, one could add). There has been a failure to develop a theory of reading. This is

27. 'Women's Writing: *Jane Eyre*, *Shirley*, *Villette*, *Aurora Leigh*', *Ideology and Consciousness*, no.3, 1978, p.31.

largely, I suspect, because any such analysis would have to confront directly one of the most difficult problems of a materialist aesthetics: the problem of value. Virginia Woolf, it might be noted, simply ignored this problem. Although challenging much of what constituted 'the canon' of great literature of her period, she slides quite unremorsefully into the worst kind of aesthetic league-tabling in much of her criticism. Preoccupation with the question of value ('quality', 'standards') has been detrimental for feminist criticism and appears to have been posed as a choice between two limited options. On the one hand, we have the view exemplified by Virginia Woolf: that women have not reached the achievements of male writers, but that this is to be attributed to the constraints historically inherent in the conditions in which their work was produced and consumed. On the other hand, there is the view that women *have* achieved equally in respect of aesthetic value and we only think otherwise because of the warped and prejudiced response of a predominantly male, and sexist, critical and academic establishment.

This debate is fruitless (although admittedly seductive) in that it reproduces the assumption that aesthetic judgment is independent of social and historical context. Simply to pose the question at this level is to deny what we do already know: that not only are refined details of aesthetic ranking highly culturally specific, but that there is not even any consensus across classes, let alone across cultures, as to which cultural products can legitimately be subjected to such judgments. I am not contending that these observations obviate the problem of aesthetic value, since I believe it to be an urgent task of feminist criticism to take it on in the context of the female literary tradition, but merely that it should not be posed in simplistic terms.

In respect of literary production and distribution, consumption and reception, we should attend to the different ways in which men and women have historically been situated as authors. I am not so sure that this difference is

equally relevant to the *representation* of gender in cultural products. For, while I do not wish to exculpate any particular male author from responsibility for irredeemably sexist work, it remains true that the imagery of gender affects both men and women profoundly, if differently. Problems arise when we try to distinguish, at the level of our reading of novels, between the images presented by male authors and those presented by female. The question of representation is beset by the problem of interpretation, and this is why I have been arguing that we cannot rely on subjective readings. If, for instance, a novel is published by a feminist publishing house and it carries on its jacket a blurb telling us it is 'a telling indictment of patriarchy' we are likely to read the contents (the story of a woman's humiliation at the hands of her brutal male lover) as precisely that. If, as is conceivable, a similar story is published by another firm with a blurb referring to 'sex and violence' and a cover picture of a supine woman wearing only a torn negligée, we shall read it rather differently (if we read it at all). Yet these readings will be determined not by any differences in the text itself but by the inferences about it we have drawn from its presentation.

This simple example illustrates two problems. The first is that we cannot assume that a particular meaning is intrinsic to the text, since it must depend on how it is read. Put another way: ideology is not 'transparent', and this, as I shall emphasize later, has implications for overtly politicized art. Second, it raises the question of authorial intention, which leads down many disastrous alley-ways. There has been a general tendency for feminist criticism to approach male and female authors very differently. Female authors are 'credited' with trying to pose the question of gender, or women's oppression, in their work, and male authors are 'discredited' by means of an assumption that any sexism they portray is necessarily their own. It seems extraordinary that these tendencies, both of which in their rampant moralism deny precisely the fictional, the *literary*, structure of the texts, should have taken such hold in the field of 'women and literature'. The attempt to present women

writers as 'trying to solve' problems of gender is particularly fraught with problems. For although women writers frequently do, quite understandably, structure their work around the issues which their experience has provided them with, we ignore the *fictional* nature of their work at our peril. To construe a novelist as a sociologist manqué is to lead to the position adopted by Rachel Harrison, who makes the singularly misplaced comment that 'in *Shirley*, Charlotte Brontë is working with a necessarily descriptive account of the changing forces and relations of production' and then goes on to specify the 'later theoretical developments' that might have improved her analysis.²⁸

If this identification of text and female author is unsatisfactory, so too is the parallel treatment of male authors. Cora Kaplan, in her very interesting assessment of *Sexual Politics*, suggests that Millett's refusal to see the ambivalence in her authors' work, her intransigent criticism of their sexism, is based on 'the unproblematic identification of author, protagonist and point of view, and the unspoken assumption that literature is always a conscious rendering of authorial ideology'.²⁹

It is neither plausible nor profitable to study literature for the purpose of berating morally reprehensible authors. Nor is it possible to take literary texts, or any other cultural products, as necessary reflections of the social reality of any particular period. They cannot even provide us with a reliable knowledge of directly inferrable ideology. What they can offer, I suggest, is an indication of the bounds within which particular meanings are constructed and negotiated in a given social formation; but this would depend upon considering a fairly wide range of such products. Imagery is a notoriously misleading indicator: think of the impression created by studying, for example, the iconography of royalty in contemporary Britain. The proverbial Martian might be forgiven for concluding, from all those pictures of the

28. Rachel Harrison, 'Shirley: Relations of Reproduction and the Ideology of Romance', *Women Take Issue*, London 1978, pp.185-6, 187.

29. Cora Kaplan, p.10.

Queen reviewing regiments, opening Parliament, enthroning archbishops and so on, that she controlled all the repressive and ideological state apparatuses. It would take a more systematic study to dispel this illusion.

In spite of all these reservations we can usefully isolate some of the processes by which the work of reproducing gender ideology is done. In a rough and preliminary way we can identify processes of stereotyping, compensation, collusion and recuperation, across a range of cultural practices.

The notion of a 'stereotype' has become so over-used that it may be thought to lack sufficient clarity, but it is I think of use in looking at the way gender difference is rigidly represented in, for instance, the mass media. Recent work has shown the pervasive operation of gender stereotypes in advertising and in children's books. Trevor Millum has described the extremely limited images of women presented in a sample of advertisements: they relate almost exclusively to women's role in the home, oscillating between the glamorous and efficient hostess and the dutiful, caring mother.³⁰ With regard to children's books, Nightingale and others have commented on the extent to which they represent a sexual division of labour far more rigid than even the sharp differentiation we know to exist.³¹ Many children whose mothers are in regular employment must be surprised to find that the mothers in their early school reading books are invariably and exclusively engaged in housework. This process of stereotyping is probably the one best-documented documented in feminist studies, and the existence of such rigid formulations in many different cultural practices clearly indicates a degree of hard work being put into their maintenance. We could, perhaps, be forgiven for regarding this imagery as the 'wish-fulfilment of patriarchy'.

30. Trevor Millum, *Images of Women: Advertising in Women's Magazines*, London 1975.

31. Camilla Nightingale, 'Boys Will Be Boys But What Will Girls Be?' in Martin Hoyles, ed., *The Politics of Literacy*, London 1977. See also Bob Dixon, *Catching Them Young 1: Sex, Race and Class in Children's Fiction*, London 1977.

The category of 'compensation' refers to the presentation of imagery and ideas that tend to elevate the 'moral value' of femininity. One could take examples from the plethora of practices which, in the context of systematic denial of opportunities for women, attempt to 'compensate' for this by a corresponding ideology of moral worth. The dichotomous view of woman embodied in the ideology of the Catholic Church, Rosemary Ruether argues, does precisely this: juxtaposing madonna and whore, mariolatry and an oppressive and contemptuous attitude to its female members.³² An important element of such compensatory work is the romanticism of woman that it generates. This romanticism may well be 'genuinely' felt by both men and women and I do not use the term 'compensation' to imply that these processes are necessarily conscious or intentional. An interesting example of this process is given in a study by Hilary Graham of the literature handed out to pregnant women.³³ Graham's analysis of the romantic photography of this genre (softly focused shots of idyllic mother-and-child scenes) compares rather ill with the patronizing and curt clinical treatment they get when they leave the waiting room and enter the examination cubicle. Finally we should note the importance of an historical account of this process. As Catherine Hall's and Leonore Davidoff's work in different ways demonstrates,³⁴ the 'ideology of domesticity', with its

32. Rosemary Radford Ruether, ed., *Religion and Sexism*, New York 1974. See the editor's own paper ('Misogynism and Virginal Feminism in the Fathers of the Church') for this argument.

33. Hilary Graham, 'Images of Pregnancy in Ante-Natal Literature', in R. Dingwall et al., ed., *Health Care and Health Knowledge*, London 1977.

34. Leonore Davidoff, 'The Rationalization of Housework', in D. Leonard Barker and S. Allen, eds., *Dependence and Exploitation in Work and Marriage*, London 1976; Leonore Davidoff et al., 'Landscape with Figures: Home and Community in English Society', in Juliet Mitchell and Ann Oakley, eds., *The Rights and Wrongs of Women*, Harmondsworth 1976; Catherine Hall, 'The Early Formation of Victorian Domestic Ideology', in S. Burman, ed., *Fit Work for Women*, London 1979; Catherine Hall, 'Married Women at Home in Birmingham in the 1920s and 1930s', in *Oral History (Women's History Issue)*, vol.5, no.2, Autumn 1977.

intense moral and sentimental elevation of the family home was developed in the stultifying ethos of Victorian restrictions on female activity.

The notion of 'collusion' may be taken to refer to two processes that it is useful to distinguish. On the one hand, we can note the attempts made to manipulate and parade women's 'consent' to their subordination and objectification. The classic example here is provided in John Berger's discussion of the female-nude painting tradition. Having stressed the blatant voyeurism of much of this genre he comments on the practice of portraying a female nude surveying herself in a mirror: 'you painted a naked woman because you enjoyed looking at her, you put a mirror in her hand and you called the painting *Vanity*, thus morally condemning the woman whose nakedness you had depicted for your own pleasure. The real function of the mirror was otherwise. It was to make the woman connive in treating herself as, first and foremost, a sight'.³⁵ This connivance, or collusion, does not always take the form Berger outlines. The second process to which the notion of collusion refers is crucially important: that of women's willing consent and their internalization of oppression. This point has already been touched on in connection with the question of sexuality, and indeed one reason why psychoanalytic theory has acquired its present credence among feminists is precisely that it does offer an explanation of consent and collusion. An analysis of gender ideology in which women are always innocent, always passive victims of patriarchal power, is patently not satisfactory. Simone de Beauvoir's solution to the problem was to suggest a general inclination towards 'bad faith': if women are offered the chance of relinquishing the existential burden of subjective responsibility, men may expect them to show 'complicity'.³⁶

Acceptance of the importance of collusion need not necessarily lead either to a crude formulation of women's consciousness as simply 'false consciousness', or to a denial of objective conditions of oppression. It is important to

35. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, Harmondsworth 1977, p.51.

remember the extent to which our consciousness is formed in conditions of subordination and oppression. We cannot, by the simple act of will, wish away politically 'incorrect' elements of our consciousness or 'reactionary' sources of pleasure. I am not suggesting that collusion should be regarded with complacency, for clearly it should be contested, but we need to develop further our understanding of the means by which it is constructed and of what the conditions of its amelioration would be.

Finally I want to mention the process of 'recuperation'. I refer here to the ideological effort that goes into negating and defusing challenges to the historically dominant meaning of gender in particular periods. Anyone disputing the work involved in ideological reproduction could profitably consider the 'hard labour' that has been put into accommodating women's liberation in the media. It is, of course, particularly apparent in advertising. Although I cited Trevor Millum's account of stereotyping in advertisements, this picture should be modified by looking at the ways in which the advertising media have sought to recapture lost ground on the question of women's independence. Although clearly some advertisements that play with the notion of an independent woman are aimed at a market of female purchasers (such as the ambiguous 'Every Woman Needs Her Daily Mail'), many others are explicitly addressed to redressing the effects of women's liberation. An obvious example of this might be the advertisement of tights 'for women who don't want to wear the trousers'.

The question of recuperation is perhaps one of the most interesting in the study of ideology. Elizabeth Cowie's detailed interpretation of the film *Coma* provides a suggestive discussion of this phenomenon.³⁷ The film, although ostensibly constructed around a female character

36. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, Harmondsworth 1974, p.21. I am not suggesting that de Beauvoir sees collusion as anything other than a *response*: she also argues that 'woman is shut up in a kitchen or boudoir, and astonishment is expressed that her horizon is limited. Her wings are clipped, and it is found deplorable that she cannot fly'. (p.616).

who plays an intelligent and courageous role of detection, takes away with one hand what it has given with the other: our heroine cracks the riddle but finally has to be saved by her boyfriend. This type of scenario is not solely a response to the activity of the present women's liberation movement, although clearly we may look forward to more of it as the movement gains ground. It is a response, to changes in the position of women, which may be generated at other times. Helen Roberts, for example, has outlined parallel processes.³⁸ Taking both popular fiction and the work of novelists such as Winifred Holtby and Dorothy Sayers, Roberts describes the presentation of women whose independence is initially convincingly depicted (particularly by Sayers), but eventually denied by the action of the narrative.

What implications does the approach outlined in this chapter have for 'cultural revolution' and for political art? I want to recapitulate two significant points: the first, that ideology — as the work of constructing meaning — cannot be divorced from its material conditions in a given historical period. Hence we cannot look to culture alone to liberate us — it cannot plausibly be assigned such transcendental powers. Second, since there is no one-to-one relationship between an author's intentions and the way in which a text will be received, the feminist artist cannot predict or control in any ultimate sense the effects of her work. These two points constitute an important limitation for the practice of politicized art, and in addition we have to consider the material resources (of production and distribution) which limit, often cruelly, the effectiveness of such work.

Nonetheless the struggle over the *meaning* of gender is crucial. It is vital for our purposes to establish its meaning in

37. 'The Popular Film as a Progressive Text — a Discussion of *Coma*', *m/f*, nos. 3 and 4, 1979 and 1980.

38. Helen Roberts, 'Propaganda and Ideology in Women's Fiction' in D. Launson, ed., *The Sociology of Literature: Applied Studies* (Sociological Review Monograph no.26, Keele 1978).

contemporary capitalism as *not* simply 'difference', but as division, oppression, inequality, internalized inferiority for women. Cultural practice is an essential site of this struggle. It can play an incalculable role in the raising of consciousness and the transformation of our subjectivity.³⁹

39. Some of the ideas touched on in this chapter are explored at greater length in two fascinating books not published at the time of writing. Both take up feminist issues in the context of an incisive reconsideration of a materialist analysis of art. See Janet Wolff, *The Social Production of Art*, and Terry Lovell, *Pictures of Reality: Aesthetics, Politics, Pleasure*, both forthcoming, London 1980.

4 The Educational System: Gender and Class

Sociological and Marxist accounts of the educational system have, until recently, focused on the question of class to the exclusion of any systematic consideration of gender. The dominant tradition in Britain has sought to document empirically the ways in which educational opportunity, and hence social mobility, has depended upon social class. The progressive character of this work should not be overlooked, since it has provided successive Labour governments in this country with evidence and arguments on which to base their programme of reforms, notably in the democratization of secondary education. Yet this tradition of work is vulnerable to criticism on two major grounds. First, it offers no analysis of the role of the educational system in the creation of a sharply sex-segregated labour force. This question is not addressed theoretically and, indeed, it is hard to see how it could be, given that many of the now classic studies in this field are, literally, studies of the education of boys.¹ A parallel case may be made on the question of racial division. Second, from a Marxist point of view, such studies operate within a descriptive sociological framework of ideas about stratification and, as AnnMarie Wolpe has argued,² cannot provide a satisfactory explanation of the processes involved.

1. See, for example, David Hargreaves's *Social Relations in a Secondary School*, London 1966.

2. AnnMarie Wolpe, 'Education and the Sexual Division of Labour', in *Feminism and Materialism*.

Feminist response to this problem has taken three forms. There has been an important drive towards describing and analysing the processes and elements in the educational system that have been neglected in previous work. This research has been extremely valuable and I shall discuss it later in this chapter. Second, some feminists have argued that approaches such as the one developed by Michael F. D. Young (known in the profession as the 'new' sociology of education) provide, through their emphasis on the social and political definition of legitimate knowledge, useful insights into the problem of a male-defined curriculum. I will return to these arguments, on which I have general reservations, later. The third response, which I consider to be the most important in the context of developing a Marxist feminist theoretical perspective, has been the attempt to consider systematically the place of gender in an analysis of the educational system as a principal agent in the reproduction of capitalism. These arguments have not only been dominated by the influence of Louis Althusser, but have historically been constructed as a debate with the analysis of education provided in his 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses'.³

This chapter returns, in a specific context, to the problems of debates of Chapter 1. In the first section I discuss attempts by Marxist feminists to explore the educational system from the point of view of an Althusserian conception of social reproduction. The most serious difficulty with this approach is the problem of transposing onto the divisions of gender a theoretical framework conceived and elaborated in terms of class relations. Feminists attempting this analysis are brought back necessarily to the 'sex and class' debate, which needs to be resolved in one way or another for us to move on. For this reason the second section of the chapter is centred on a detailed consideration of the different ways in which this question has been addressed, and some conclusions are suggested. In the light of these the third and final section of the chapter explores some specific aspects of the con-

3. In *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, pp.123-73.