Building a National Literature

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I.

Introduction:
The Institution of Literature

This book is concerned neither with individual literary texts nor with
the influence or reception of literary works. By traditional standards,
therefore, it falls outside the field of literary studies. From the point of
view of both hermeneutics and reception aesthetics, the problems I
examine are "extraliterary"; they form the "background" of the "actu­
al" subject matter. The topics and themes dealt with in this book are
considered "helpful" to literary scholars in the interpretation of texts
but not indispensable for their work, for the decision about how much
"background material" to include in a given investigation is cus­
tomarily left to the individual researcher. Obviously the conventional
dichotomy of literary versus extraliterary gives the concept of literature
priority; but in addition—and this point is particularly significant for
the evaluation of historical studies—it relegates all other subjects with­
out discrimination to supplemental status. What characterizes all such
subjects is that they are not literature. This strategy is taken so much for
granted in traditional literary studies that it is never so much as ques­
tioned. Its consequence is to assume that an ontological difference exists
between literature and everything else (including nonpoetic types of
texts).

As long as this dichotomy prevails, the problems I examine here will
remain marginal to literary studies, with respect both to their historical
importance and to their inclusion in and penetration of contemporary
theoretical discourse. The practical result is obvious: projects that do
not deal with poetic texts are declared merely ancillary. The conceptual
and theoretical results are less obvious but in the long run more sig­
ificant: the hegemony of one particular concept of literature, whose
explication is made to appear the true task of literary criticism, reduces
the extraliterary fields (religion, politics, society, economy) to those specific relationships—understood as causal conditions or functional connections—which merely facilitate the interpretation or analysis of the particular text under consideration. Among the fields thus rendered auxiliary are the sociology of author and public, the psychology of reading, and the economics of bookmaking. Traditional literary criticism characteristically considers these auxiliary disciplines an unordered set and leaves unexplored the systematic interrelationship of literary criticism to such major fields as anthropology, linguistics, and history. Within the traditional model—whether its focus is historical or formal—collaboration is judged possible only if the data and results of the adjunct disciplines can be "put to use." The ingrained dichotomy of literature and nonliterature precludes a comprehensive, theoretical framework.

The historical and empirical study of readers has suffered more than any other from this incompatibility. Hermeneutics and reception aesthetics concede such study has a contribution to make but view this contribution as supplemental. Even the more open field of reception aesthetics, which has distanced itself from the hermeneutical model, assumes a fundamental difference between the concept of an implied reader and a historico-empirical reader. Historical reception remains logically subordinate.

The fruitfulness of a scholarly collaboration in which various disciplines exchange results but generally follow divergent theories and methods is limited. More useful would be models that redefine the field of inquiry and hence make clear where collaboration may be possible. A change of paradigms would first and foremost necessitate a scrutiny of the conventional definition of literature, which is largely responsible for our current problems. The traditional concept of literature is derived from the concept of art; in other words, literature consists of texts with aesthetic characteristics (which then need to be explored by literary critics). Furthermore, literary texts are designated *fictional*; that is, they have a specific referent relationship, self-referentiality, which differentiates them from other texts. This "literariness," however, should be considered an open question rather than axiomatic, for as long as literariness is defined dogmatically, literary studies will remain fixated on those conventional characteristics. If, on the other hand, we resolve the dichotomy between literature and nonliterature, we can then restructure the field of inquiry. (This resolution, incidentally, would not mean leveling the distinction between literature and nonliterature.) The result of such a reorganization would be not only that the concept of literature would define what is nonliterary but also that a differentiated concept of the nonliterary would define what qualifies as literary.
The search for a new paradigm has engaged literary scholarship since the 1960s, and by no means only in Germany. This search has manifested itself chiefly in a reexamination of the hermeneutical model, introduced into German studies by Wilhelm Dilthey. The debate involved linguistic and semiotic approaches, as well as reception aesthetics and empirical studies of reception. Similar confrontations have taken place in Marxist theory, especially in the work of Louis Althusser and Pierre Macherey. A variety of premises and motives undoubtedly underlie the concerted attacks on the hermeneutic tradition. Semiotics and empirical literary studies, mainly concerned with putting literary criticism on a scientific basis, have challenged the confusion of the reader with the scholar, whereas reception aesthetics has directed its attack primarily against the essentialist textual interpretation that characterizes the hermeneutic tradition. Yet in the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer’s more radical successors, reception aesthetics retains concepts of text and reader which are closer to the hermeneutic tradition than to the scientific ideal of semiotics and empirical theory; hence no consensus has yet been reached on the character of the posthermeneutical model. Reception aesthetics has criticized empirical studies of reception as a reversion to positivism; empirical scholarship, on the other hand, has viewed the proposed models of reception aesthetics as halfway measures. Thus Norbert Groeben maintains that neither Hans Robert Jauss nor Wolfgang Iser has really broken with the hermeneutical model: “Despite the orientation of the concept of the text toward communication theory, reception aesthetics maintains the confusion of reception with interpretation, of the recipient with the interpreter, which I have criticized as ‘confounding subject and object.’”¹ Groeben interprets reception aesthetics as an immunizing strategy, which rescues the old paradigm by radicalizing it. And indeed, the vehement polemics conducted by reception aesthetics against empirical models that draw the historical reader into the investigation gives his reproach a certain plausibility.

At the center of recent discussion is the break with traditional concepts of the text and the work. Modernist aesthetics, which treats the work as an open, multivalent, and multifunctional structure, prepared the way for this break. The radicalization of this subversion leads to a further question: What is the role of the recipient in the structuring of textual meaning? Following Russian formalism and the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl and Roman Ingarden, the school of Constance (Jauss, Iser) has drawn attention to the openness of the literary

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text and has effectively attacked the traditional, essentialist model of interpretation. By taking account of the reader, reception aesthetics abandons the search for a predetermined meaning, but it remains indebted to the dialogic model of the hermeneutic tradition, for the separation of the implied from the external reader perpetuates the familiar dichotomy. By means of this strategy, which is also evident in the work of Hannelore Link, reception aesthetics establishes a defensive position that, in Groeben's words, "accepts empirical investigations with respect to socioliterary and psycholiterary problems, but keeps the interpretation of a work in reserve for hermeneutical 'understanding.'" This division of labor preserves the conventional distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic investigations. In practice, the new formulation of the concept of the work does not alter the priority of the text, which, just as in formalist interpretation, is regarded as the primary object. The reader's achievements in bestowing meaning, insofar as they cannot be demonstrated in the text itself, continue to be disregarded. This criticism is not limited to the phenomenological approach; it is also directed against radical models that bring the interpretive achievements of the reader to the fore. One may thus ask, with Groeben, whether the attempt to include the perspective of communication theory in the hermeneutical model is frustrated by the model's inner theoretical contradictions. But the more important argument, I believe, is that reception aesthetics, like the American reader-response theory of Stanley Fish, is tied to the formulation of problems that belong to the old paradigm and that consequently draw on the old paradigm for their solutions.

Beyond Reception Theory

It would be interesting to examine why this attack on traditional hermeneutics and literary history was mounted in Europe and in the United States at roughly the same time. Such historical questions, however, are largely neglected in the following pages, which focus primarily on the theoretical implications of reception theory. A radical approach to the theory of reception leads to aporias that cannot be resolved within the framework of the received theoretical model. That is to say, if the premises of reception theory are carried to their logical conclu-

2Hannelore Link, Rezeptionsforschung (Stuttgart, 1976).
3Groeben, Rezeptionsforschung, p. 48.
4For the historical context, see Frank Lentricchia, After the New Criticism (Chicago, 1980); Vincent B. Leitch, Deconstructive Criticism (New York, 1983); and David Couzens Hoy, The Critical Circle: Literature, History, and Philosophical Hermeneutics (Berkeley, Calif., 1978).
sions, questions will arise that demand a new theoretical framework. No matter how the concept of the reader is conceived, it is too restricted to explain literary structures and processes. Reception theory—wherever it has gone beyond a positivistic history of reception—has prevailed over traditional hermeneutics by bringing the status of the literary text into question. But as its critics have objected, this very step has bound it once again to the text. The criticism of traditional hermeneutics has turned out to be merely another stage of hermeneutics. As formalism and literary immanence have been overcome, a new formalism has developed. Iser, for instance, not only distinguishes between the empirical-historical reader and the implicit reader but expressly bans all questions of historical reception from reception aesthetics; Fish, after radically questioning the objective structure of the literary text, ultimately restores it to its original status. Reader-response theory, as Jane P. Tompkins has noted, shares some basic premises with the older formalism and is inconceivable without it. Of course, this argument does not invalidate reception theory. It merely shows that the break with traditional hermeneutics and aesthetics, the impetus behind the new theory, itself belongs to a tradition; it is part of a historically bounded debate.

In its polemics, reception theory overestimates the degree to which its models can be generalized. We are faced today with the task of striking a critical balance so that new questions can be formulated. My point of departure is a summary of the premises and central arguments of reception theory, which I follow with an attempt to present the consequences to which these premises logically lead. This lays the foundation for the third step, a critique of reception theory the goal of which is to arrive at a new model that will not so much exclude the tenets of reception theory as overcome them dialectically. The outlines of this model, which centers in the concept of the institution, have already been sketched in the work of other scholars, although no satisfactory form has yet been found for it. In a fourth step, I discuss the various solutions that have been suggested, focusing not on a critical discussion of individual theoreticians but on an explication of the problems involved. Since the concept of the institution necessarily involves sociological theories, it gives rise to a question the theory of reception has persistently evaded: How does the institution of literature relate to other institutions in the social system? Or, to put it in Marxist terms: What

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connection can we draw between the institution of literature and the forces and relations of production? Understandably, formalist theory has no ready answers to these questions, yet they do appear on the horizon of reception theory.

Reception Aesthetics

It has repeatedly and correctly been observed that there is no such thing as a reception theory. Rather, we have a series of distinct approaches to reception. Nevertheless, we can identify common suppositions that largely determine theoretical strategy insofar as they highlight some arguments and exclude others. The point of departure in the theoretical work of Iser and Jauss as well as Norman Holland and Fish, to name but a few, is the literary text or work, as it is in formalism. But the basis of operation, unquestioned in earlier hermeneutics—the objectivity of the text or, more specifically, the objective ‘existence’ of meaning—is now called in question. The New Criticism and formalism take it for granted that the meaning of a work of art is inherent in the text itself and needs only to be revealed. In reception theory the locus of meaning is shifted, for a new category—the reader—has been introduced. It is not so much the existence of readers which undermines traditional hermeneutics—the concept of the reader is certainly compatible with traditional hermeneutics or with historicism—as the assumption that the reader, as the inevitable addressee of the text, helps determine its meaning or, more radically, actually generates its meaning. This argument robs the text of the stability that traditionally made it the exclusive source of interpretation.

The category of the reader, which appeared at about the same time in the work of Fish, Jauss, and Iser, serves to destabilize and decentralize the literary text. Their aim in introducing this category was to define more precisely the special character of literary texts and the distinctiveness of literary history (in contrast to political history). This approach, familiar to us from the New Criticism, has left its marks on the beginnings of reception aesthetics, especially in Iser’s early work;7 Jauss shows a similar intention when he proposes the category of the reader in order to construct an autonomous history of literature.8 Like formalism, early reception aesthetics characteristically took for granted the autonomy of the work of art. Only after the approach had been more fully developed did questions arise to undermine this certainty and lead to the assumption that aesthetic literary discourse, not inherently dif-

7Wolfgang Iser, Die Appellstruktur der Texte (Constance, 1970).
ferent from other kinds of discourse, becomes distinctive only through the actions of the participants.

Iser's attempt to define the "literariness" of a text takes the form of differentiating—with the help of speech-act theory—between expository and fictional texts. In his view, literary texts are distinguished by the fact that they have no single interpretation. An interpretation that draws a particular meaning out of a text diminishes it; it confuses the text with the meaning ascribed to it. What characterizes the literary text is that nothing presented in it has independent existence: "A literary text neither illustrates nor creates anything in the described sense; at best it can be defined as the representation of reactions to things." The reader has to reconstruct imaginatively the point of view developed in the text in order to give the work concrete form. According to Iser, the reader thereby takes on the decisive task of decoding the text, not merely to reveal its meaning but to participate in the establishment of its possible meanings. In other words, the meaning of the text cannot be grasped at all without the activity of the reader. The same can be said of expository texts, but the statement gains significance in the case of literary texts because the act of reading generates meaning that goes beyond the structure of the text. What Iser, following Ingarden, calls concretization of a text is an act of creation that brings to completion the production of the text: "Every reading thus becomes an act of attaching the oscillating structure of a text to meanings which as a rule are themselves created in the process of reading."10

As soon as the reader is brought into play, one might object, the generation of meaning becomes arbitrary; in other words, the objectivity of the text is disregarded. Iser counters this assertion by trying to show that ambiguity of meaning is inherent in the structure of a literary text, because a text contains blanks that the reader must fill in.11 Literary texts carry a certain degree of indeterminacy, which is why they have many possible concretizations. Thus every interpretation and meaning has a subjective element, yet the degree of subjectivity is objectively determined (or limited) by the structure of the text. "The reader constantly fills in or eliminates blanks," says Iser. "By eliminating them he utilizes the room available for interpretation and establishes between individual points of view even those relationships which are not formulated."12 But since freedom of interpretation is not unlimited, we can distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable readings. Iser con-

10Iser, Appellstruktur, pp. 11, 13.
12Iser, Appellstruktur, p. 15.
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tinued to adhere to this position, in contrast to Fish, who saw in it a residue of objectivism.

Iser's point of departure is the status of the literary text, and his argumentation consequently focuses on problems of synchrony. Jauss's primary concern in his attempt to define the particularity of literary history is to determine historical shifts in the meaning of literary texts; consequently, he emphasizes diachrony. Both theorists agree that texts are not inherently objective but reveal their individuality only in communication with the reader. "The literary work," says Jauss, "is not an independent object that presents the same face to every viewer in every period. It is not a monument that monologically reveals its timeless essence." The unique history of a work, accordingly, lies in the history of its reception, in which its meaning first unfolds. This argument again points to the danger of subjectivity: How can a legitimate reception be distinguished from an illegitimate one? Won't the destabilization of the text make for arbitrariness? The cornerstone of Jauss's theory is not the reader's subjective understanding. Rather, Jauss tries to find a foundation for a reading that "precedes the psychological reaction as well as the subjective understanding of the individual reader." Jauss anchors the individual reading in a theory of literary communication which shifts emphasis to the concept of a horizon of expectation. Every reading is prestructured in several respects: through contemporary conventions of genre and form, through the existence of other works (intertextuality) with which the new work is compared, and through the antithesis of fiction and reality.

The adequacy of Jauss's theory—for instance, of his concept of a horizon of expectation, which has played a role in the debate from time to time—is not the issue here. For our purposes, what is important is that in his analysis of literary communication—the relationship between text and reader—Jauss, unlike Iser, takes into account elements that lie outside the text, namely, literary and social conventions. The category of the reader is not exclusively immanent in the text but includes social and historical aspects. This inclusion changes the constitution of meaning or sense. Whereas for Iser meaning is generated by the structure of the text and the purely phenomenologically conceived act of reading, for Jauss the act of constituting meaning is mediated by intersubjective social and literary conventions. These conventions help stabilize the establishment of meaning. This step allows Jauss to conceive the history of literature as a process of mediation between literary reception and the production it motivates. The meaning that is reconstructed within the horizon of a particular reception raises questions

13Jauss, Toward an Aesthetic of Reception, pp. 21, 22–23.
that in turn give rise to new literary production. As Jauss puts it, "In the step from a history of the reception of works to an eventful history of literature, the latter manifests itself as a process in which the passive reception is on the part of authors. Put another way, the next work can solve formal and moral problems left behind by the last work, and present new problems in turn." More precisely, this move leads not to the reader but back to the text, to a reconstruction of the questions whose answer the text was intended to be. In any case, the subjectivity involved in producing meaning will be substantially restricted, if not almost eliminated. The activity of reading and writing is controlled by the intersubjectively stabilized formulation of questions that the text seeks to answer. Thus the evolution of literature is no longer conceived as substantialistic but as functional.

**Reader-Response Theory**

In contrast to Iser and Jauss, who favor a model based on hermeneutic dialogue, Fish did not attempt to limit the consequences of his reader-oriented approach. On the contrary, implications inherent in his theory led him to change his position and finally brought him to a point where he could no longer overlook the aporias of reception aesthetics. For this reason it is important to trace the evolution of Fish’s theory. The earliest phase, which proceeded from acts of reading and interpreting, was merely a development from the New Criticism. But by 1970, when he wrote his seminal essay “Literature in the Reader,” Fish’s understanding of interpretation had changed. Where the New Criticism viewed interpretation as the objective exposition of the text and thus gave the text priority over the reader, Fish came to a Copernican turning point and put the category of the reader first, thereby making the meaning of the text dependent on the act of interpretation. (Henceforth it would be, strictly speaking, inadmissible to speak of the meaning of a text.) Not only does Fish believe that meaning is generated by the reader, but he explicitly separates this meaning from the text and transfers it to the reader. The reader becomes the sole source of meaning, because the production of meaning occurs in the mind, not on the page of a book.

Fish emphasizes, however, that the subjectivity of his approach should not be mistaken for arbitrariness, since the category of reader includes stabilizing elements. The concept of the “informed reader,” on which Fish relies, contains the assurance that the experience described by the reader will do justice to the text. This concept has three essential

14Ibid., p. 174.
parts: (1) linguistic competence, (2) semantic ability, and (3) literary competence. By the last Fish means familiarity with the particular character of the literary discourse, which allows the reader to pick up signals from the text. When the concept of reader is viewed from this more precise angle, it becomes evident how different empirical readers can arrive at the same, or a similar, understanding of a text; but it still has to be explained how readers whose literary competence is undisputed (critics, for instance) can arrive at widely divergent interpretations. This question proves to be decisive for Fish's theory, because the answer he initially gave—that a distinction must be made between reading and interpreting—proved unsatisfactory. This distinction defended reception theory from the accusation of relativism, but it did not provide a model for explaining contradictory interpretations of a text.

Initially, it appears, Fish misjudged the consequences of his approach. As he later admitted, the movement from text to reader led back to the text, just as it did for Iser and Jauss: "In order to argue for a common reading experience, I felt obliged to posit an object in relation to which readers' activities could be declared uniform, and that object was the text . . . ; but this meant that the integrity of the text was as basic to my position as it was to the position of the New Critics." What led Fish out of this dilemma was the realization that the literary text is not simply a given quantity; it is constituted in the act of reading. The special character of literature is defined foremost by the reader: "The conclusion is that while literature is still a category, it is an open category, not definable by fictionality, or by a disregard of propositional truth, or by a predominance of tropes and figures, but simply by what we decide to put into it." The question What is literature? is based on a decision, and henceforth that decision is arrived at by a "community of readers," an "interpretive community."

The category of informed reader has been replaced by that of the community of readers—that is, by a potentially social category that now includes discussion of habits and conventions. The individual act of reading always proves to have been prestructured by its social as well as its linguistic-literary context. The result of this decisive step is that the grounding of hermeneutics in the reader leads to an intersubjective understanding of literature, not to a feared anarchy of interpretation.

Fish expounded his new theory of the reader in the Ransom Memorial Lectures of 1979. Whereas in 1970 he had systematically distinguished between reading and interpretation so as to claim a subjective basis for reading, in 1979 he proceeded from the assumption that reading and interpretation can be differentiated only analytically; to put the point somewhat differently, that every reading implies an interpretation.

15Fish, Is There a Text? pp. 7, 11.
of the text. Moreover, individual reading already presupposes interpretive activity. Fish believed this shift in emphasis would allow him to solve a problem for which he had previously had no ready answer: How can divergent interpretations occur when the interpreters have been shown to be informed readers? His answer lies in the priority given to interpretation: the objectively determinable elements of a text can be consistently integrated with various interpretive approaches. Individual readings involve prior decisions based on the shared premises of a community of readers. The text thus becomes a function of interpretation. But even if we grant Fish is right in this respect, we must still ask how and in what way a particular meaning takes precedence over other, competing meanings. If the text is no longer the object by which divergent interpretations can be measured, then relativism seems unavoidable. One interpretation seems as good as another, as long as its consistency can be ascertained.

Unlike Iser, Fish is prepared to accept this conclusion—although he does not regard it as the anarchy feared by traditional literary studies. The concept of the informed reader implies that the act of reading is not unmediated but contains binding, transsubjective presuppositions. In 1979 Fish introduced in this connection the concept of the institution. The community of readers is, he suggested, more than a group of people devoting themselves to a particular text; it is an institution that determines how readers relate not only to a literary text but also to one another. Fish thus believes that concurring and divergent opinions can be explained if we assume all acts of reading are part of a game with rules (mostly unwritten) which no one who deals with texts can avoid. If we accept this argument, the correctness of an interpretation depends on certain norms and conventions observed by the players. Thus an interpretation is convincing only within the framework of a specific interpretive community held together by shared values and rules. Fish gives a fair description of current conditions in American literary studies when he writes: "Within the literary community there are subcommunities (what will excite the editors of Diacritics is likely to distress the editors of Studies in Philology), and within any community the boundaries of the acceptable are continually being redrawn." Acceptable reading strategies are thus determined by groups of readers banded together in interpretive communities.

The Aporias of Reception Theory

Fish’s conclusion brings reception theory to a point where it sets its own limits: no longer a new method for correcting the mistakes of

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16Ibid., p. 343.
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historicism and the New Criticism, reception theory is rather a reflection on the possibility of interpreting texts. Interpretation for Fish is still "the only game in town."

At first glance it looks as if within the framework of a methodological pluralism, Fish had renounced the claim to truth. This is not the case, however. Although he is apparently unaware of it, he has changed the level of argumentation through his introduction of the concept of the institution. Whereas his earlier essays tried to show that a literary work is constituted by the act of reading not by the text, since 1979 Fish has attempted to show that readings and interpretations are not individual acts but have always been rooted in what he calls the institution of literature. As far as the truth of the theory is concerned, investigation no longer focuses on the act of reading and its subject but on the structure of the institution. Because for Fish the act of reading is largely defined by the conventions of the community of readers, no objective scholarly discourse can take place on this level. Literary criticism, in his view, can argue only within the framework of a practical, rhetorical model, and one interpretation differs from another merely in that it is more plausible to the community of readers: "In a model of persuasion... our activities are directly constitutive of those objects [of our intention], and of the terms in which they can be described, and of the standards by which they can be evaluated." 17 Fish rightly draws attention to the fact that this model describes the practice and the history of literary criticism better than does a demonstrative, scientific model. But he seems to overlook the possibility that his discourse may no longer be comprehensible as an opposition between "persuasion" and "demonstration." The suitability of a model is no longer determined by subjective interpretation but by the conditions under which interpretations first arise.

If we follow Fish in assuming that the interpretation of literary texts is made possible by intersubjectively established rules and conventions, we must expand our epistemological interest. We are no longer exclusively concerned with substantiating specific interpretations; we also have to substantiate the norms and conventions that give rise to those interpretations. Since Fish does not consistently distinguish between these levels, he never becomes fully aware of the problem involved. He is content to offer a relatively unsystematic description of these conventions in order to explain why contemporary American critics and scholars take the attitudes they do. The institution of literature is not systematically and historically substantiated for two reasons. First, Fish's description is quite limited, since it is oriented toward academic criticism in the United States—indeed, he equates American criticism with

17Ibid., p. 367.
literary criticism in general. One might ask whether his description is valid for other societies as well. Similarly, the patterns Fish describes did not necessarily exist in the nineteenth century, let alone earlier. The lack of systematic analysis, however, is fundamental. Fish defines the institution of literature as the community of readers together with its subcommunities. Nowhere does he try to investigate the relationship of this institution to other institutions. It is possible to explain consensus and dissent within the framework of his theory. His model also accounts for changes: if norms and rules within an interpretive community change, new interpretations will result. (Known texts are reread and reinterpreted.) But how do these changes in norms and rules come about? Fish assumes that the authority of a particular interpreter will cause certain interpretations to prevail until they are replaced by others. But who gives the interpreter authority? And in what does his authority consist? Fish’s model is too abstract to answer such questions. His description of the evolution of literature and criticism remains merely formalistic. Changes occur, but their nature is not predictable or explainable. Interpretations are thus like fashions—they come and go for no ascertainable reason. Basically, nothing changes: “Interpretation is the only game in town.”

Fish’s model reveals in exemplary fashion the limitations of the theory of the reader. Whenever it draws radical conclusions from its premises—namely, that meaning is generated not by the text but by the act of reading—it confronts the institutional presuppositions of reading. Yet it is unable to rid itself of its formalist origins and mediate between the linguistic-literary and the social realms. Jauss was clearly aware of this task and in 1967 went into the matter in detail; it seems significant that even he retreated from it when he developed his theory further. In his diachronic investigations based on the question-answer model, he emphasized the intrinsic aspect of literature or developed a typology applicable to various epochs and social formations. 18 I believe this limitation of the dialogic theory of the reader can be overcome only by a functionalist or materialist approach.

The Contribution of Semiotics

Jonathan Culler’s theory of semiotics illustrates this point. His model of a literary institution borders to some extent on Fish’s, although he makes a sharper distinction between the level of interpretation and that of the institution that regulates and gives legitimacy to individual inter-

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pretations. In his essay “Beyond Interpretation” (1976), Culler advocated a field of literary studies which would systematically deal with the discourse of criticism. Understandably, he accused Fish of adhering too closely to the concept of interpretation despite his break with the New Criticism. (The validity of this objection—it is probably not applicable to Fish’s later essays—need not be decided here.) In any case, he identifies a direction for literary studies: they will have to concentrate on the system of rules and conventions on which individual readings are based.

In establishing his model, Culler follows the fundamental distinctions made in Saussurian linguistics, namely, between language and speech (langue et parole), signifier and signified, competence and performance. Just as we can speak a language without necessarily being able to explain its grammar, so we can read and explain texts without necessarily knowing the rules of literary discourse. It is enough to be familiar with those rules; that is, to be capable of literary performance. Culler defines literary competence, on the other hand, as “a set of conventions for readings of literary texts” which members of a society share and to which they consciously refer when reading or interpreting a literary text. The semiotic approach assumes that as a form of linguistic expression, a poem has meaning only with respect to a system of linguistic and literary conventions (genres, styles) that the reader has assimilated. This assumption leads to the conclusion that “the conventions of poetry, the logic of symbols, the operations for the production of poetic effects, are not simply the property of readers but the basis of literary forms.”19 As I understand this passage, the rules and conventions Culler mentions function intersubjectively, and it remains an open question whether they are conceived as objective entities or merely as subjective constructs in the mind of the reader. On the whole, Culler seems to favor an objective concept of metalevels, for such a concept would permit a scientific analysis of literature on the model of linguistics.

Comparison with Noam Chomsky’s transformational grammar shows, however, that Culler’s project must encounter greater difficulties than the linguist’s; a competent speaker of a language is familiar with its rules of grammar, but no comparable standard exists for literary competence. At any rate, divergent readings of a single text make the adoption of such a standard problematic. To overcome this difficulty, Culler posits an ideal reader—a construct embodying those characteristics upon which the community of readers has intersubjectively agreed. For Culler, the fact that a dialogue between readers can result in agreement on interpretation speaks in favor of such a construct: “The

possibility of critical argument depends on shared notions of the acceptable and the unacceptable, a common ground which is nothing other than the procedures of reading." Culler seems to consider the institution of literature as culturally bound; that is, the literary system of a society is based on conventional, mutable suppositions. Yet he investigates the precise nature of this cultural context—its effect on the production and reception of texts—no more than Fish does, because he introduces the concept of the institution on the basis of common sense, without systematic analysis. Culler fluctuates between a structuralist and an interactionist concept. As long as the institution of literature is understood as a set of norms and conventions defining the role of the reader, it remains an interactionist model and necessarily abstract. It does not take into account the fact that readers, like acts of reading and interpreting, are not exclusively predetermined by literary conventions. They are simultaneously conditioned by material interests and ideological positions. Semiotics has not supplied the conceptual instrument necessary for such a view of the institution of literature.

A first step in this direction is the plan for a semiotics of reading developed by Culler in 1980–81, in “Semiotics as a Theory of Reading.” He suggests that the effect of literary texts be investigated and that interpretations—especially contradictory ones—be subjected to semiotic analysis. He would study the operations leading to a specific interpretation. In his critical assessment of Jauss’s theory, Culler concedes that the ideologies of an epoch—for instance, assumptions concerning the relationship of the sexes, marriage, and other institutions—play a role in the interpretation of a text. Nevertheless, he argues, “it is easier and more plausible to explain these varying responses as the result of different interpretive operations and the application of different conventions than as the product of different beliefs.” The analytical dis-

20 Ibid., p. 124.
21 Jonathan D. Culler, The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction (Ithaca, N.Y., 1981), p. 58. In his most recent work, however, Culler no longer assumes that different readings are to be explained primarily in terms of diverging conventions; instead he suggests that cultural and social conditions to a large extent determine the reader’s experience. Hypothetically turning the “informed reader” of structuralism into a woman, he argues persuasively that her experience cannot be identical with that of a male reader. The broader implications of this move are obvious, as Culler himself notes: “The analogy with social class is instructive: progressive political writing appeals to the proletariat’s experience of oppression, but usually the problem for a political movement is precisely that the members of a class do not have the experience their situation would warrant. The most insidious oppression alienates a group from its own interests as a group and encourages it to identify with the interests of the oppressors, so that the
tinction between interpretive strategies and ideologies is fruitful, but it should not be construed as an antithesis. It is much more important to determine how ideologies help shape hermeneutical strategies. Reading is a less innocent operation than formal semiotics is prepared to admit. Culler rightly points out that a test case for a semiotics of reading would be to explain dissent, but this task is too narrowly defined if it is restricted to the level of operations.

The Sociological Concept of the Institution

We have now reached the point where we can indicate the course literary theory must take in order to overcome the limits of reception theory. It is certainly justified to point out that concentrating on reception is insufficient, that the link between production and reception must be preserved, but it is not overly fruitful. The category of the institution appears more promising, for it embraces both production and reception. However, literary scholarship has made use of the concept in various ways without adequately clarifying its nature. When Harry Levin used it more than a generation ago to describe the social character of literature, he intended to transcend an expressive and mimetic understanding of literature: literature is not something that has to be related to society; it is itself a social factor. Thus Levin concludes when he has shown that a reflection theory of literature cannot be sustained; it is enough for him to establish that literature is as much an institution as is law or the church. Thus, he observes, literature "cherishes a unique phase of human experience and controls a special body of precedents and devices; it tends to incorporate a self-perpetuating discipline, while responding to the main currents of each succeeding period."22 This formulation—whether one agrees with it or not—is so general that no new insights can be derived from it. Levin's comparison with law and the church is instructive but also confusing. Is he referring to norms or political struggles must first awaken a group to its interest and its 'experience.'" On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism (Ithaca, N.Y., 1982), p. 50. By the same token, Culler's theory of reading (understanding a text) has changed. Whereas in Structuralist Poetics he insisted on the importance of identifying the correct reading of a text, in On Deconstruction he favors the notion of different readings without privileging one as the true reading. Inverting the traditional opposition of true and false, Culler now argues that "understanding is a special case of misunderstanding" (p. 176). Reading as an act of interpretation includes both understanding and misunderstanding. In other words, all interpretations are, as Culler concludes, partial. In connection with this shift Culler drops the category of the institution as a privileged point of reference because it seems to be open to the deconstructive move.

Introduction

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to the organization? Culler’s and Fish’s use of the concept of the institution has similar problems. The term establishes a vague connection between literary and social phenomena, even though the sociological use of the category is not defined.

Three approaches can be distinguished in recent sociological discussion: (1) the interactionist concept of the institution, found in the work of Talcott Parsons and his school; (2) the materialist approach of Antonio Gramsci and Louis Althusser; and (3) the theory of norms of the Frankfurt school.

The Interactionist Concept of the Institution

The concept of the institution plays a decisive role in the work of Talcott Parsons, where it serves as a link connecting the social role and the subsystems that constitute the social system. Parsons defines it as follows: “An institution will be said to be a complex of institutionalized role integrates which is of strategic structural significance in the social system in question.” Institutions arise when the role expectations that underlie all social interaction become so stabilized that they determine and at the same time legitimize the actions of a subject. This process includes the internalization of standards, norms, and values to which the acting subjects can mutually refer. Thus, says Parsons, “the institutionalization of a set of role-expectations and of the corresponding sanctions is clearly a matter of degree. This degree is a function of two sets of variables; on the one hand those affecting the actual sharedness of the value-orientation patterns, on the other those determining the motivational orientation or commitment to the fulfillment of the relevant expectations.”

23 Talcott Parsons, *The Social System*, 5th ed. (Glencoe, Ill., 1964), p. 39. The beginnings of a materialist critique of systems theory are to be found in Hans Sanders, *Institution Literatur und Roman* (Frankfurt, 1981), pp. 39–40, who correctly points out that a socially homogeneous system such as that posited in Parsonian theory does not exist. But if the normative system (system of norms) of a society cannot be comprehended as being homogeneous, then the systems-theoretical approach is not capable of explaining social antagonisms adequately. (The objections of Ralf Dahrendorf to Parsonian theory point in the same direction.) Sanders would like to relate the concept of the institution to a Marxist model and proceed from the connections between the forces of production, relations of production, and class structures, but he does not explicate this desideratum in detail. Above all, the question where to situate and ground the category remains unclarified in this model. Sanders’s attempt to distinguish between objective social structure and the development of structures of meaning on the subjective side suggests he would like to treat cultural institutions such as literature as being part of these structures of meaning; that in turn, however, would involve treating literature as part of the superstructure. Yet his earlier assumption—namely, that institutions consist of both a material apparatus and regulating norms—contradicts this desire. Sanders’s formulation—“Taken materialistically, it [the concept of institution] is directed at both the relations of econom—
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in an existing social system. They contribute decisively to the integration of the acting subjects.

Parsons distinguishes the concept of the institution from material collectives; thus he explicitly differentiates between the collective church and the system of beliefs, which he regards as a religious institution. By its very nature, the institution is for him an “evaluative phenomenon.” From the viewpoint of literary studies, this is not all; equally instructive is Parsons’s differentiation of three types of institutions—relational, regulative, and cultural. Relational institutions define the realm of reciprocal social role expectations for the acting subjects; regulative institutions determine the legitimacy of interests; and cultural institutions determine the realm of cognitive doctrines (ideologies), the system of expressive symbols (art), and, finally, the realm of individual morality. The classification of institutions according to their position in the system has undeniable advantages: it allows us to localize individual institutions and establish systemic connections, for example, in the relationship between ideologies and expressive symbols. The disadvantage is equally undeniable: Parsons’s division is essentially formal and tells us little about how institutions actually function in concrete historical situations. His concept of the institution does not lead to objective material structures but rather to social subsystems, which Parsons understands as orientational and behavioral systems derived from subjective action.

The Materialist Concept of the Institution

The materialist concept of the institution differs in several respects from the interactionist concept. First, it stresses the transsubjective character of institutions; second, when Marxist theory makes use of the concept of the institution, it attempts to mediate it with social structure. The category of the institution was unknown in early Marxist theory. It was introduced, without systematic consistency, by Gramsci and was later developed primarily in the theory of Althusser, though he used the term only occasionally. In British Marxism, the category of the institution has been used primarily by Raymond Williams, who developed it
in line with Gramsci’s idea of hegemony. Whereas the ruling class possesses an apparatus—the state—which allows it to achieve its goals through coercion and force, in the realm of civil society (that is, the cultural and political public sphere) hegemony, as Gramsci says, indirectly serves to assure the dominance of the class. As Williams puts it, hegemony is “a whole body of practices and expectations, over the whole of living: our senses and assignments of energy, our shaping perceptions of ourselves and our world. It is a lived system of meanings and values.”24 But the importance of hegemony in the class struggle is not sufficiently clear in this definition. Only when the ruling class controls the cultural and political institutions of civil society in addition to the state apparatus does its position become legitimate and therefore secure. The class struggle is waged, as Gramsci emphasizes, not only in the political and economic spheres but equally, and possibly with even greater intensity, in the cultural sphere.25

Gramsci’s distinction between the state and civil society reappears in Althusser’s differentiation between the state apparatus and the ideological state apparatus. Althusser’s terminology is misleading because it implies that those phenomena which are subsumed under the concept of the ideological state apparatus are in fact part of the state. Nonetheless, the importance of this concept in Althusser’s theory is clear. His point of departure is the notion that in order to maintain conditions conducive to production every class must reproduce its productive means—its material means and also its manpower. The reproduction of manpower involves more than concern for the physical maintenance of workers; it extends, as Althusser emphasizes, to instilling and reinforcing habits, attitudes, and convictions that are indispensable for produc-

24Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford, 1977), p. 110. Following Althusser, Terry Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology* (London, 1975), employs the concept of the institution within the framework of his description of the “literary mode of production.” Eagleton proceeds from the hypothesis that literary production can be considered a part of the ideological apparatus, that is, it has the function of reproducing the relations of production. He uses the concept of the institution—in a fairly loose way, significantly—to designate material organizations such as bookstores, publishing houses, and printing businesses, but also to indicate the manner in which literature as a whole is anchored in society: “But it is not only a question of the ideological use of particular literary works; it is, more fundamentally, a question of the ideological significance of the cultural and academic institutionalization as such” (pp. 56–57). In this sense, Eagleton speaks of the separation and selection of texts from their original social formation and of their definition as literature, which then assumes its specific and variable function in the cultural tradition of a society. On the whole, however, the concept of the institution remains subordinate to the category of the “literary mode of production,” which in turn is seen in connection with both the general ideology and the specific aesthetic ideology of a given society.

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tion. This aspect of the reproduction of manpower is taken over by authorities and institutions belonging to the superstructure. Althusser expressly mentions the school and the church; other institutions, such as the press and the theater, can readily be added. The social function of these institutions is to “assure subjection to the ruling ideology or control over its ‘practice.’”

If all members of a society—of the ruling as well as the subordinate classes—share ideologies and the practices connected with them, they can readily be integrated into the productive process; they will function as quasi-responsible members of an accepted social order.

These reflections on the reproduction of the forces and relations of production assume such importance for Althusser because they allow a more consistent definition of the classic Marxist topology of base and superstructure. State and ideology prove to be not only dependent quantities, as they are in traditional Marxist theory, but indispensable aspects of reproduction which in turn affect the base. In Althusser’s interpretation of the Marxist-Leninist theory of the state, class struggle is concentrated on state power: the contending classes try to take possession of the state apparatus (which is not identical with the executive power of the state). Alongside the state apparatus, which is normally controlled directly by the ruling class, are those organs of authority which Althusser calls the ideological state apparatus: “The term . . . will be used to signify a certain number of entities which are perceived by the direct observer as distinct, specialized institutions.”

Althusser mentions school and church, law, the political system, and cultural institutions such as art and literature.

The institutions embraced by this concept are so heterogeneous that one wonders whether they constitute any meaningful structural unit at all. Althusser concedes that most of them are not part of the state, yet he argues that they fall into the realm of the civil community, which Gramsci distinguishes from the state apparatus in the narrow sense. These institutions have two things in common: they belong to what Jürgen Habermas defines as the bourgeois public sphere, and they fulfill the same function. All ideological state apparatuses operate through the medium of ideology, that is, through the consciousness of the subject rather than through material force.

At first glance, Althusser’s concept of the ideological state apparatus seems to lead to a reduction of social praxis, for the affirmative purpose

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27Ibid., p. 143.

28See Jürgen Habermas, Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit, 2d ed. (Neuwied a. Rh., 1965).
of these institutions seems to be fixed from the start. But his theory recognizes that they are relatively autonomous; they do not simply grow out of the conditions of production but are interdependent with them. They therefore have their own history. Nevertheless, Althusser’s definition of these institutions remains functional; in the final analysis they reproduce the existing form of society. His theory is not so much incapable of explaining complex social situations (this is formally possible, since the ideological state apparatus is assumed to be relatively autonomous) as it is lacking an instrument for the analysis of social dynamics. It describes the actual function of institutions in advanced capitalist societies but is less exact about conditions that could bring about change.

With good reason, Williams criticized Althusser for limiting Gramsci’s concept of hegemony by introducing the category of an ideological state apparatus. The characteristic feature of hegemonic institutions is that they do not contribute directly to class dominance but work according to their own processes and expend their energy on immanent problems, to the point where even internal opposition can lend general stability to the social system. As Williams remarks, “The true condition of hegemony is effective self-identification with the hegemonic forms: a specific and internalized ‘socialization’ which is expected to be positive but which, if that is not possible, will rest on a (resigned) recognition of the inevitable and the necessary.” To prevent reduction of the concept of the institution, Williams proposes a distinction between institutions and formations. By the latter he means scientific, literary, and philosophical tendencies that influence intellectual production. Such formations can be attached to institutions yet are not identical with them. Formations are specialized practices that take place within or on the periphery of institutions.

Clearly, Althusser’s and Williams’s interpretation of the concept of the institution has little in common with Parsons’s theory. Williams regards organizations as institutions, whereas Parsons does not. Williams’s viewpoint goes back to Althusser (and to some extent to Gramsci), who equates the institution with the organization. Althusser’s notion of schools, for instance, includes what is taught and the method of transmitting it (didactics), as well as formal organization and physical structure (buildings, etc.). For him, institutions are important because they combine ideology and practice, because their formal organization gives them the capacity to transmit their ideology in the form of concrete practice. This synthetic interpretation is plausible for some institutions—for example, religion/the church. In the case of literature

29Williams, Marxism and Literature, p. 118.
and art, however, it makes good sense to distinguish between physical and formal organization, on the one hand, and ideological formation, on the other. Nevertheless, if the relationship is totally dissolved and we emphasize either organization or ideology alone, the concept of the institution loses much of its explanatory power. Above all, we lose a sense of how ideologies are adopted in a society—that is, how they become practice. Williams does not make clear, for instance, how formations relate to institutions. How does the social process give rise to formations? If formations are assumed to be (relatively) independent from institutions, how do they become part of everyday life?

Althusser’s approach became fruitful for literary theory through the work of Pierre Macherey and Renée Balibar. What Williams merely touched upon, Balibar and her collaborators systematically explored, for example, in their book on the development of a French national language after the revolution of 1789.30 Macherey and Balibar, however, move away from Althusser’s concept of literature in their later works. Macherey in particular rejects the idea of literature and prefers instead to talk about concrete literary practices, which can take different forms in different societies and different epochs. Detachment from traditional aesthetics, not complete in Althusser’s work, sharpens the eye for institutional aspects. Macherey’s early work is especially attuned to Althusser’s theory of the ideological state apparatus and accordingly interprets ideology as a system of material social practices. Thus the task of literary studies is no longer to investigate the genesis of literary production or evaluate it aesthetically but to analyze the effect of literary texts in specific historical situations—in particular, within such institutions as schools and universities. As Etienne Balibar and Macherey indicated in their introduction to Les français fictifs (1974), Marxist literary theory has to be reformulated so as to address two problems: the character and expression of class positions in literature, and the ideological mode of literature. These two aspects prove to be essentially identical. The ideological mode and the attitude toward different classes are both revealed through their effects. Balibar and Macherey define literature as an ideological form that becomes manifest in the context and through the agency of ideological state apparatuses. The objectivity of literary production they view as inseparable from social practices within a particular ideological state apparatus. Here the term literary production refers not to an individual text or work but rather to social praxis—among other things, the common language

A materialistic concept of literature focused on social practices has replaced the idealistic concept that stresses the autonomy of a work of art. Concrete social institutions, such as schools, determine the definition of literature. Thus Etienne Balibar and Macherey emphasize that the manner of teaching languages adopted in the schools both creates the basis for literary production and is the result of that production (inasmuch as the production of literature in turn affects linguistic conventions).

What function does literature have as an ideological form? For Etienne Balibar and Macherey—and this distinguishes them from Althusser—the ironing out and apparent resolution of ideological contradictions is in the foreground. Real social contradictions, which are insoluble in concrete historical situations, are thrust aside so that imaginary solutions can be found for them. These circumstances reverse the relationship between reality and literature: instead of mirroring reality, literature—as social practice—creates a fictive semblance of reality. In other words, realism and fictitiousness are concepts constituted through the praxis of literary production. The institution of literature, or the various apparatuses that represent it, is not the sum total of existing literary texts and their authors; rather, it must be understood as the locus where the literary practices of authors, texts, and readers are constituted. Aesthetic autonomy disappears as a concept: the idea of artistic autonomy manifests itself as a special literary effect whose aim is to conceal the ideological character of the literary process.

To repeat the essential points: the subject and object of literature—authors, readers, and texts—are generated by social practices. Individuals become literary subjects (authors, readers) in the context of apparatuses. In this respect, all empirical analysis directly concerned with "reality" confuses levels, because it regards ideological formation as reality. On the other hand, investigations that begin with an implied reader overlook the fact that the text and the implied reader contained within it are not given quantities but rather the results of literary practice and belong in the realm of ideology; for the implicit reader—who is presumed to play a role in the text—is one of the places where the individual functions as the subject.

Etienne Balibar and Macherey shift emphasis to impact (effects). Un-

31Balibar and Laporte have shown in *Le français national* that the modern French language contains two separate practices: basic French, taught in the elementary schools, and literary French, taught in the high schools.

like empirical studies of reception, their work considers the reader not as primary but rather as the subject constituted by the ideological state apparatus. The literary effect can thus be described on three levels: (1) the creation of the effect under specific social conditions; (2) the reproduction of the dominant ideology; and (3) the effect as determined by dominance. Finally, Balibar and Macherey also include criticism (that is, texts that comment on and evaluate literature) among the effects. These texts, however, are expressly denied the status of metacommendaries. They are treated instead as expressions existing on the same level as the texts they comment on. Literary texts and critical commentaries thus appear as agents whose task it is to reproduce the dominant ideology. This function is analyzed by Renée Balibar in her investigation of the use of literary texts in schools. The language used to interpret literary texts forces the apparently free reader to pose precisely those questions that will project the dominant ideology; this process does not exclude internal differences and divergent approaches to interpretation.

Obviously this theory has no room for the critical function of art. Because they have an aesthetic character, literary texts remain bound to ideology. Thus far, this approach has not been able to demonstrate how a text can be read against the grain, how a reading formation (convention) can be breached. Althusser's concept of ideology restricts the function of literature. Since Etienne Balibar and Macherey accept Althusser's dichotomy between science and ideology yet reject his concept of art (art lies between ideology and science), literature remains for them a part of ideology. It cannot be equated with scientific knowledge and therefore cannot transcend its affirmative function.

The Concept of the Institution in Critical Theory

The traditional Marxist model of base and superstructure is always in danger of being used in a reductionist manner. Even Friedrich Engels's well-known observations that the superstructure is relatively autonomous and that only in the last resort can the economic base achieve dominance cannot solve this difficulty. The danger has led to the increasing rejection of this model in critical theory, although the concept of social mediation has been retained. Both Theodor Adorno and Habermas insist that the cultural sphere is part of the whole social process, but whereas in his Aesthetic Theory Adorno sets forth a theory of the work of art, Habermas's studies are more in line with Herbert Marcuse's and Max Horkheimer's move toward a unified theory of culture. This context can serve as a basis for developing the concept of the institution. Let us begin with the category of the public sphere, which is at the center of Habermas's early work and which he defines
“as a sphere that mediates between society and the state, in which the public becomes the transmitter of public opinion.” On one side is the state apparatus (bureaucracy and a standing army); on the other, civil society with its “permanent relationships, which had developed with the stock exchange and the press in the traffic of commodities and information.” The function of the bourgeois public sphere as it was constituted in the eighteenth century was to articulate public opinion, that is, to deliberate on the control of state power: “The principle of control, which the bourgeois public opposed to this [the state]—namely, publicity—was intended to change sovereignty as such, not merely to exchange one basis of legitimacy for another.”

The public sphere is more than the sum total of citizens who transmit public opinion; it is the locus of those institutions that Althusser calls the ideological state apparatuses—the press, schools, literature, and so forth. But Habermas’s emphases differ from Althusser’s; he wishes to show that the historical origin of these institutions was the attempt to restrict the power of the absolutist state and that they assumed the functions Althusser generally ascribes to them only in the late nineteenth century, in connection with the development of monopoly capitalism.

Although these approaches diverge, there are interesting parallels in Althusser’s and Habermas’s assessment and description of cultural institutions. Both authors make a basic distinction between the state and its apparatus on the one side and a realm of ideological argumentation on the other. Literature is one of the institutions in which this argumentation is carried on. Althusser gives no special emphasis to literature, which he sees primarily as an apparatus established by the dominant class for the purpose of assuring its own dominance. For Habermas (like Marcuse and Adorno), however, the relationship between class dominance and literature is more complex and at the same time more historical. In his view, the literary public sphere did not serve the feudal class or the absolutist state. Rather, it was the area in which the rising middle class developed moral and political self-consciousness. Literary discourse, institutionalized as art criticism, prepared the way for the political criticism of absolutism.

Habermas’s theory of the public sphere does not include the concept of the institution, but we can easily derive the latter from his theory. The institution of literature proves to be part of the public sphere; as the public sphere changes, so does the structure of literature. The organization of individual works of art does not directly change along with

34 Habermas, Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit, esp. pts. 5–7.
35 See Peter Uwe Hohendahl, The Institution of Criticism (Ithaca, N.Y., 1982), pp. 44–82.
changes in the public sphere; rather, the structure of the public sphere determines the conditions of literary production and consumption. One example is the difference between literary conditions in the early eighteenth century and those of the late nineteenth century. In Habermas's judgment, the function of literature during the transition from feudal absolutism to a liberal bourgeois society was to promote the psychological and social self-understanding of the new class; in advanced bourgeois society, however, the literary functions of criticism and entertainment separated, and literature increasingly took the form of a consumer commodity. The marketplace also came to exert more influence on the quality of literary products, and literature thus became a commodity not only in form (by dissemination in the marketplace) but also in content. This example clearly reveals the founding conditions of the institution. Habermas assumes that in the final analysis the conditions of production determine the structure of the public sphere. (The transition in the late nineteenth century from liberal to organized capitalism changed the structure of the public sphere.) The structure of the public sphere in turn determines the form of the institution of literature. Finally, the conditions under which all communication concerning literature takes place affect the structure of individual literary texts. Thus Habermas assumes a complex interaction between base and superstructure, but at the same time he implies that the levels of the superstructure are overdetermined. The institution of literature is therefore a relatively independent part of the public sphere, and its history is not identical with the economic evolution of society.

**Literature and the Concept of the Institution**

The sociological concept of the institution occasionally takes literature into account, but as a rule only in passing, as one among many cultural institutions. Its usefulness in literary studies depends on a reconciliation of sociological theory and literary theory. The first step is to inquire which concept of the institution in literary studies fits which sociological concept of the institution. Only thereafter can we discuss the fruitfulness of rival approaches.

**The Theory of Reception and Semiotics**

For both Stanley Fish and Jonathan Culler the institution of literature is basically an immanent category; it designates not so much the framework of conditions for the functioning of institutions as the norms and
conventions that govern the reading and interpretation of texts. Since these critics are primarily interested in the literariness of texts—the same is true for the phenomenological approach of Wolfgang Iser—their studies avoid analysis of the relationship between the institution of literature and other institutions. Their theories, however, include suppositions that go beyond literary immanence. Fish’s and Culler’s category of the institution contains sociological premises of which they are unaware, because they regard them as self-evident. Both theorists posit an interactionist model of the social system similar to the theory developed most fully by Parsons. Its elements include—especially in Culler’s semiotic theory—acting subjects, fixed and predictable role relations, and values and patterns of behavior by which subjects are integrated into the social system. In any case, Fish and Culler assume, in the sociological interactionist sense, that actions such as writing and reading are carried out by individual subjects, albeit within the framework of the social system and its subsystems, which define the possible actions in each case. Although Culler insists that individual acts of reading cannot be viewed in isolation but must be seen as institutionally determined, he holds to an underlying concept of the subject. This point is evident when he discusses the possibility of consent and dissent. Readers are able to reach a consensus because they can refer to common norms and conventions; but more important, when they differ in opinion, they can reflect on the reasons for their divergent points of view. In order to be able to communicate and act at all, subjects must depend on certain conventions, but as autonomous subjects they can in rational discourse come to an understanding about the conventionality of reading: “If the distinction between understanding and misunderstanding were irrelevant . . . there would be little point to discussing and arguing about literary works and still less to writing about them.” Culler sees beyond those conventions that determine our reading a rational discourse that leads to a consensus about the correctness or incorrectness of interpretations. The supposition that rational discourse is always available places Culler’s *Structuralist Poetics* in the tradition of the Enlightenment and thus close to the norm-oriented communication theories of, say, Habermas and Karl Otto Apel.

Unlike Culler, Fish assumes that acting subjects are totally bound to the conventions of their institutions. They cannot break out of these structures. The discourse of literary criticism is for this reason not

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36 Culler, *Structuralist Poetics*, p. 121.
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evidential but persuasive. Fish's subjects are players in a game they cannot quit; if they dislike it, all they can do is change the rules, possibly against the wishes of other players.

Obviously Fish's and Culler's reader theories offer no more than the rudiments of a social theory; nevertheless, we can recognize some basic patterns. The concept of interpretive communities introduced by Fish has an evident prototype in the university, that is, in the community of scholars who carry out research projects according to mutually accepted rules. This model is tacitly carried over to society as a whole, with the result that those aspects of society which are not in accord with the academic community are ignored. Both Fish and Culler link social relations to the model of the face-to-face group, in which one can overcome contradictions and antagonisms arising in the course of discussion. Even though the theory of the reader began around 1970 with a criticism of traditional hermeneutics, Fish came to the conclusion in his essay "Demonstration vs. Persuasion" (1979–81) that the framework of the institution of literature still includes texts, readers, and interpreters. In other words, nothing has changed except that we now know why things are the way they are. Fish's theoretical conventionalism, which deliberately avoids transcendent norms, can only verify what is already known to be true. This is not an insignificant contribution, if he can show that our conventional understanding of reading does not coincide with our practice. Yet his approach has its limitations, for it indicates no direction for that practice. Conventionalism is indifferent to historical processes. No matter how radical his rhetoric may be, therefore, in the final analysis Fish supports the existing belief system, the status quo. The social function of the conventions and norms that mold the reader remains beyond the horizon of his critical analysis.

The Materialistic Model

The limits of the interactionist model of the institution become apparent when we consider the function of the institution. The functional approach has no part in this model, which assumes the institution to be based on individual subjects whose interaction with other subjects brings the institution into being in the first place. Individual subjects create norms and rules, arrive at decisions, reach agreements, or have different opinions concerning literary texts. If we compare this model with the concept of the institution developed by Althusser, we find that function is a problem of central importance for him, because it tells us how the institution of literature operates within a society. For Althusser and Macherey, apparatuses are not constituted by subjects; rather, subjects are constituted by ideological apparatuses. In this respect, institu-
tions such as schools or the law are the decisive mediators between the base and individuals. For Althusser the institution is indisputably primary. Literature can therefore be described, following Macherey and Etienne Balibar, as a system of practices, norms, and rules which regulates the production and consumption of texts. These norms and conventions, however, should not be isolated from the concrete, material organizations that constitute the apparatus transmitting them to society. This is what Bertolt Brecht had in mind when he described the bourgeois theater of the early twentieth century as an apparatus that transmits bourgeois ideology no matter what is produced on the stage. Walter Benjamin argued similarly in his essay "Der Autor als Produzent" (The Author as Producer) that a true change in literature will be effected not by plays and novels but by taking the means of production out of the hands of the bourgeoisie.

But the fusion of apparatus and ideology in Althusser's concept of the institution also has its disadvantages. It fails to distinguish clearly between apparatus and institutionalization. There is an advantage in not equating institutionalization with the apparatus (organization). Religion, as a system of beliefs, is separate from the organization of the church. For analytical reasons, it would probably be sensible to make a similar distinction between the institutionalization of literature as a system and its apparatus. In the case of the institution of literature it would be more difficult to describe the organization than the institutionalization, because the organization cannot simply be equated with such concrete establishments as the publishing and book trades, the press, and so forth, as is sometimes done. Rather, the organization should be understood as the way in which literature is regulated by society. In a capitalist society this regulation is accomplished through the marketplace. The organization pertains more to conditions of production, whereas institutionalization occurs in the realm of ideological practices, which show the involved subjects how to interpret and use works and various genres.

Individual establishments such as the book trade and libraries can be investigated on the level of the organization; on the level of institutionalization, such channels as criticism, literary history, and aesthetics. We shall assume that a relationship exists between institutionalization and organizations, though it is not necessarily mechanical: in a capitalist society, for example, the predominant transmission of literary works in the marketplace, which in form makes them commodities, also deter-

mines the framework within which they are institutionalized, although it does not define every aspect of it. Such factors as literary criticism and literary history also have their own histories. An approach that examines the organization alone and on that basis mechanically draws conclusions about individual texts—as was the case in commodity aesthetics—neglects transmission through institutionalization, just as the reverse approach, which makes conventions and norms the principal point of departure and views them as sole determinants, gives no role to the social apparatus and accordingly slights the category of the institution.

The Model of Critical Theory

Habermas’s theory affords a good point of departure for examining the possibilities and limitations of a theory that puts primary emphasis on the conception of art, even though he attempts to ground the category of the public sphere (and with it, literature) in the relations of production. This approach might well adopt Peter Bürger’s definition of the institution of art as “the notions about art (definitions of function) generally held by a given society (or by particular classes or strata), viewed from the perspective of their social determinacy.” This definition equates the institution of art with the dominant conception of art in a class, stratum, or group. Generally accepted ideas determine both the production and the reception of individual works. Thus the institution has genetic as well as logical priority over the individual work of art. Says Bürger, “The differentiation of function is carried out—through the agency of aesthetic norms—on the production side by means of the artistic material and on the reception side by establishing attitudes toward reception.”40 As the concept of art changes, according to Bürger’s theory, so will the production of art and the manner in which works of art are treated.

Bürger’s definition comes close to an interactionist concept such as we found in the work of Fish and Culler: the category of the institution is linked to nonmaterial ideas, not to the concept of the apparatus. But there are also clear differences. Bürger moves from the start on a higher plane of abstraction: the institution is constituted not by norms and conventions but by general ideas about the function of art or literature. As a result, conventions are not merely brute facts but are derived from a general determination of function. The classic example of such a generalized idea is the category of aesthetic autonomy, which according to Bürger has regulated the production and reception of art since the

late eighteenth century. The concept of autonomy (on the level of the institution, not of the individual work) implies that art has been freed from the realities of social life; a realm has been created for it in which purposive, rational thinking is not applicable. Whether this assumption is historically accurate, whether literary production was really defined in the nineteenth century exclusively or chiefly by the category of autonomy, is not the issue here. More important for the basic argument is the notion that there exists a hegemonic category that determines the outlook of subjects who participate in literature. If one assumes with Bürger that the aesthetics of artistic autonomy predominated between the end of the eighteenth century and the advent of dadaism in Germany, it follows that divergent or rival points of view had to contend with the aesthetic of autonomy. In other words, the specific qualities of this aesthetic are understandable only against the background of the hegemonic point of view.

The advantage of a functional conception of the institution of literature over an interactionist one is apparent: the theory does not stop with groups and “reader communities” but is oriented toward a concept of function within society as a whole. Society is the source of the norms and conventions that mold literary production and reception. This approach is not focused on the individual subject; rather, it assumes that individual subjects share general opinions that go beyond those of the collective class or group. Moreover, a functional model makes it possible to find for historical processes explanations that go beyond mere description.

This last point needs further clarification. Bürger’s model can explain historical processes only by making additional assumptions about the course of social processes. This is true especially for the relationship between the institution of art and the social formation. Such a relationship can be established on the level of acting, collective subjects—as in the relationship between the rising middle classes and the aesthetics of autonomy. It can also be established on the level of conditions of production—say, between the creation of commodity markets (capitalism) and the liberation of the institution of art. It may further be assumed that the institution of art has a dynamics of its own and does not depend on an external impetus.

Bürger makes use of all these kinds of explanations, but for reasons to be discussed, he favors the hypothesis that the institution has its own dynamics. Thus he assumes in his Theory of the Avant-Garde that in keeping with its own logic, the aesthetics of autonomy transcends itself in its last phase and in surrealism reaches a stage of self-criticism: “The totality of the developmental process of art becomes clear only in the stage of self-criticism. Only after art has in fact wholly detached itself
from everything that is the praxis of life can two things be seen to make up the principle of development of art in bourgeois society: the progressive detachment of art from real life contexts, and the correlative crystallization of a distinctive sphere of experience, i.e., the aesthetic.  

Here Bürger expressly rejects the establishment of a direct connection between the social formation and the category of the institution of art, calling instead for an investigation of the development of components of the social system, each of which has its own logic and consequently follows a separate temporal path. By thus reformulating the problem, Bürger avoids the question of how the institution of art relates to the social structure (through what channels it is transmitted) and specifically how the evolution of the institution of art relates to the evolution of the social system.

In a later reflection on the problem of institutionalization (1979), Bürger was more cautious about assuming a consistent autonomous dynamics of art and accordingly stressed causal determination. In attempting to explain the difference between the institutionalization of art in a courtly, feudal society and in a bourgeois society, he now resorted to the concept of class (nobility/bourgeoisie) but also considered production conditions (the capitalistic, commodity-producing, market commercialization of literature). This shifting of the relational framework—to which can be added a third strategy involving concepts of modernization and rationalization—points to the difficulties with which a functional theory has to contend.

In the first formulation of his theory Bürger defined the institution of art as the “productive and distributive apparatus and also . . . the ideas about art that prevail at a given time.” Later he expressly excluded the apparatus as a purely empirical element. The result was the equation of the institution of art with notions of artistic function. Ideas about the purpose of art (including those which assert that art has no purpose) are undoubtedly an important aspect of the institution, but they should not be confused with it. Although the self-understanding of a class will determine the content of aesthetic norms and conventions, it should not be construed as the institution itself. As Bürger rightly stressed in 1974, the institution includes the apparatus. The exclusion of the apparatus—and with it, social practices—intensifies the problem of sociological grounding that Bürger’s theory tries to address. This is the point at which the hidden idealism of the functional approach be-

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comes apparent. Bürger rightly resists the equation of institutionalization with empirical factors, because the functional point of view cannot be grasped by this means, but he wrongly treats the apparatus as a merely empirical factor. The idealism of Bürger’s theory is rooted in a fear of arguing reductively. Bürger tries to solve the problem of grounding by introducing the concept of the norm: the norm mediates between the individual work, the institution of art, and the social system. This suggested solution to the problem resembles the interactionist model insofar as it establishes (albeit tacitly) a relationship between the social and the aesthetic realms through the concept of the subject. Norms are transmitted through the consciousness of socialized subjects: as moral norms they concern (regulate) society; as aesthetic norms they are put to use in the realm of art. If aesthetic norms are derived from social norms, the relationship between the institution of art and society can be described as the application of familiar norms to a special realm. Bürger makes use of this strategy in his description of the institutionalization of art in the seventeenth century: “In courtly, feudal society, aesthetic norms either go directly back to social norms (the bienséances and rules of class privilege come to mind) or they indirectly serve the interests of society (this could be demonstrated by the dramatic unities). Aesthetic norms mediate the content of individual works and the prevailing social norms and assure their relative conformity.” Bürger thinks, social norms in a bourgeois society can no longer be directly translated into aesthetic norms because the content of the work of art is severed from the social sphere through the aesthetics of autonomy. Nevertheless, aesthetic and social norms are still brought into relationship, albeit through several channels—for example, when the social norms in the content of a work of art are made problematic in order to humanize the author and his or her readers.

If we redefine the concept of the institution in such a way as to emphasize its intangible character (views of art and their social function), we imply a different concept of the subject. An orientation toward norm theory leads either to a collective subject (a class or group) representing the institution or to an individual subject (the public conceived as a set of subjects). In either case we lose the priority of the institution. This is the key difference from Althusser’s concept of the institution, which takes the apparatus as its point of departure and conceives of what the norm-theoretical model calls the institution as the ideology of the apparatus.

Theories focusing on social and literary norms and those centering on the concept of the apparatus are equally burdened by certain problems.

44Bürger, Vermittlung-Rezeption-Funktion, p. 190.
Although Althusser's approach is capable of showing how the institution of literature functions in society, his analysis remains generalized and undifferentiated with respect to other cultural institutions. It does not take sufficiently into account the specificity of literary practices, which is given exact articulation by semiotic and norm-theoretical approaches (Culler and Bürger, respectively). The functional norm-theoretical model is decidedly better equipped to deal with these questions, but it also has the problem that either it treats norms as autonomous—attributing a unique history to them from which the history of the institution is then derived—or else it has to search for mediating agencies that will give norms and values a social basis. This attempt to find a solution can easily lead back to an interactionist approach: if we derive norms from the groups that carry them, we particularize the concept of the institution, thereby significantly weakening the value of the category for the description of literary structures and processes. This result is a return to the community of readers of conventional literary theory. A theory that is unable to explain the institution of literature as a general social phenomenon (functioning on the level of society as a whole) has limited value or at least offers no model for the reconstruction of the history of literature.

**Toward a Theory of the Institution**

What, then, are the requirements for an adequate theory of the institution? First, one would expect the institution of literature to be a category distinct from the form and content of individual works. It is directly concerned neither with the analysis of texts nor with their genesis and dissemination, but rather with the conditions under which writing and reading occur. This distinction is independently emphasized by Culler and Bürger. Moreover, one would expect a theory of the institution to deal systematically with these basic conditions. When we speak of conventions and norms, we are concerned not with individual traits but with a system. Third, one would expect the specific character of the institution in relation to other cultural and social institutions (that is, its particular significance and function within society) to be clarified. Finally, one would expect historical specificity to be taken into consideration, for example, the differences between various historical epochs and social formations, and the evolution of the institution of literature itself.

No theory to date has done justice to all these requirements. Conventional literary theory is obviously unsatisfactory, both as a system and historically. A semiotic model such as Culler's is an improvement over
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Fish's approach, but it fails to take sufficient account of the status of literature in society as a whole. A materialist approach, which takes function as its point of departure, has the most to offer. One could build on the investigations of critical theory, especially those of Benjamin, but Althusser and his school should also be taken into account. We know that Benjamin sought to explain the changes that took place in the history of art and literature at the end of the nineteenth century as a fundamental shift in function and grounding. Using reproduction as his point of departure, Benjamin argued that the status of art changed when it became technically possible to reproduce it. During the late nineteenth century this innovation changed the basis, existence, and reception of works of art: a political basis replaced the cultic basis; mass reproduction replaced uniqueness; and individual reception, with its absorption in the object, gave way to a collective, dispersed reception. What matters in the strategy of this approach is not its problematic periodization and its disputable reasoning that the structural change in the institution was brought about by a new method of reproduction, but rather its concept of a model in which changes in artistic form and content are related to a change in function. Even if Benjamin's explanation of literary evolution is not accepted, his model can still be fruitful for the theory of the institution.

Bürger agrees with Adorno's and Habermas's criticism of Benjamin but accepts the distinction (contrary to Adorno) between the general function of art—for which he employs the concept of the institution—and its individual use. His theory, which is obviously influenced by Marx's early ideology-critical concept of art, criticizes Benjamin's lack of insight into the function of art in bourgeois society. It underscores the emancipation from religious ritual which has taken place since the Renaissance. Whereas Benjamin assumes that the change in function occurred behind the backs, so to speak, of producers and recipients, Bürger brings the importance of consciousness and the intention of the artist to the fore: “Here, the loss of aura [i.e., uniqueness] is not traced to a change in reproduction techniques but to an intent on the part of the makers of art.” The weight of the argument has thus shifted toward the superstructure, toward norms and ideology. Bürger is convinced that the change in function cannot be explained by contradictions between productive forces and the conditions of production. Instead, he tries to shift explanation for the functional change to the level of the institution, describing the change as a differentiation within liter-

46Bürger, Theory of the Avant-Garde, p. 29.
ary production (the differentiation of art as a subsystem). Bernard Zimmermann has rightly objected that this shift in focus does not automatically solve the problem posed by Benjamin: “Instead of looking for periodization only in the realm of the institution of art, a multiperspectival historical methodology would have to clarify in which way change in the institution of art changes the conditions of artistic formation, and in which form artistic production reflects and provokes change in the institution of art.”47 This justified criticism of Benjamin’s periodization should not lead us to restrict functional change to the differentiation of art as a subsystem without posing a further question: What purpose does this isolation of a subsystem serve within the framework of the system as a whole? On a metalevel, the question would thus be what function is served by a function.

Benjamin’s theory tries to explain the evolution of art and literature by examining the changes in their social use. The question of their status—however one chooses to evaluate Benjamin’s answer—throws light on social practices and the perceptions and forms in which such practices are organized. The institution of literature is thus a structure with interdependent elements. It must be assumed, moreover, that these elements are variably coordinated: relationships, for instance, can be stronger or weaker. If we were to single out one component as decisive in the hierarchy, we would reduce the institution in either an idealistically abstract or a materialistically mechanical fashion. The historicity of the concept of the institution cannot be understood merely as an external factor (along the lines “we have to bear in mind that literature was institutionalized differently in the eighteenth century than in the twentieth”). Rather, the historicity of the category tells us that its origins lie in the historical process and that its existence is inconceivable outside history. In this respect it is not unproblematic to assume that the category has content in every period. It is no accident that discussion of the concept of the institution has revolved around modern (eighteenth-to twentieth-century) literature. The institution becomes visible, as it were, only in connection with the aesthetics of autonomy. It is legitimate, I believe, to ask whether the concept can be meaningfully applied to medieval circumstances. It is not even necessary to assume, as Benjamin and Bürger do, that art was largely cultic in the Middle Ages and therefore part of ritual in order to ask whether and to what extent the institutions of religion and art were separate in this period.

Finally, a few questions may be raised concerning the internal structure of the concept of the institution. Both Culler’s semiotic model and

Bürger's norm theory proceeds from the hypothesis that the institution of literature is a unity that subsumes all texts and readings. Apart from the possibility of distinguishing analytically between organization (apparatus) and institutionalization, the question arises whether and how much the institution is divided into subinstitutions, each of which has its own dynamics. Furthermore, how do collective bodies—social classes and groups—relate to the institution of literature? Must we assume that the institution is always controlled by one class, or do competing classes develop their own respective institutions?

A sociohistorical derivation of the institution of literature from social strata (classes or groups) may favor the latter hypothesis. It might be possible, for example, to assume a separate, class-linked institution for the literature of the working class which developed over the course of the nineteenth century. But as this very example shows, the assumption would be meaningless. Although proletarian literature differs in form and content from middle-class literature and is certainly directed at a different public, its genres and conventions undoubtedly share a concept of literature which includes that of the bourgeoisie. On the level of the institution, however, the relationship between middle-class and proletarian literature can be described as a rivalry: the new class included literary means in its struggle for recognition and equality, whereas the bourgeoisie underscored its hegemony by suppressing and denouncing opposing concepts and practices. Similarly, the institutionalization of the early eighteenth century can be understood as a rivalry between courtly and "middle-class" conceptions which continued until a new concept became entrenched about 1770 and thereafter dominated. It is thus more fruitful to postulate the existence of contradictory tendencies within an institution of literature comprising the entire social sphere.

The institution of literature cannot be identified with one class, but it can be dominated by one class. This is what Althusser says when he speaks of an ideological apparatus whose function is to guarantee reproduction of the conditions of production. For Althusser, one class normally controls cultural institutions; from a historical point of view it is the turning points, when control shifts from one class to another, which are of greatest importance. These turning points, however, do not necessarily correspond to the junctures in political and economic history. The eighteenth-century change of German literature into a middle-class literature (Verbürgerlichung) does not correspond to a similar process in the conditions of production and certainly not to the attainment of political dominance by the bourgeoisie. It is consequently better not to separate the concept of the institution into strata, as Bürger proposes for French seventeenth-century literature. In the conflict between classes, where cultural antagonisms play a large role, the im-
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important thing is to hold those positions that are strategically decisive. Whoever makes the decisions about what is written, printed, and read to a great extent controls the consciousness of the public. Literary censorship is one of the obvious instruments of domination.

The systematic analysis of class struggle in the institution of literature has to go beyond descriptions of individual phenomena, of course. In this context the differentiation of the institution becomes an important issue. To what degree are subinstitutions created which could become effective controlling factors? Since the eighteenth century, literary criticism has functioned as such a factor—an institution within an institution. Because it has been assigned, within the framework of the public sphere, the task of both creating rules for the evaluation of literary texts and putting those rules to use, it commands a central strategic position. The critic's standing in the literary public sphere shows that art criticism involves more than the mere expression of private opinion, even though the critic is a private individual. He or she is backed by the authority of the institution and of the class that occupies it.

In the nineteenth century, literary history became a factor in addition to the institution of criticism. Again we are dealing with more than the mere production of a certain type of text. The rapid rise of literary history in the early nineteenth century becomes explicable only when we investigate its function. Beyond the purported task of describing the evolution of a national literature, its purpose was to secure literary tradition. Of strategic importance were the selection of important authors and the analysis of filiation. The canonization of the literature of the past was separated from literary criticism and developed into an independent institution. This new subinstitution created an apparatus for itself within the university, which, incidentally, tied it more closely to the state apparatus than to literary criticism because in Germany the university is controlled by the state. Through the appointment of professors, for example, the state could indirectly influence the methodology and content of literary history.

Literary norms and conventions are an important element of the institution of literature, and so one must ask in what way they become part of the institution. Put differently, does any authority have jurisdiction over literary theory? Whereas in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries literary theory went hand in hand with criticism (if we disregard the general field of aesthetics in the universities), since the end of the nineteenth century academic literary studies have increasingly absorbed theory. At least, the academy dominates professional reflection about what constitutes literariness and what effect literature has on society. Today, not only literary tradition but concepts of the function
of literature are transmitted through universities and schools, because
the literary intelligentsia was to a great extent educated at the univer-
sities.

The example of literary theory also shows that the relationship be­
tween a subinstitution and the apparatus that brings it into existence is
not automatically fixed and may change. Literary theory appears to
lack the apparatus that literary criticism and literary history have at
their disposal. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries it shared the
apparatus of criticism (journals, newspapers); in the twentieth century
it made use primarily of the apparatus of literary studies (the univer-
sity). It is clear from this example, furthermore, that subinstitutions are
the channels joining the institution of literature to other institutions—
via literary history to the institution of education, via literary criticism
to the press. In view of the tasks and functions the educational system
performs for society, therefore, literary studies can also be analyzed
within the framework of the institution of education. (Presumably Al-
thusser would regard this as the more important aspect for society.)
Literary criticism, on the other hand, can be treated as part of the
institution of the press. It could be argued that the fate of literary
criticism has been determined more strongly by structural changes in
the press than by internal changes in literary norms. The place literature
and criticism have been given by the press in the layout of newspapers
has largely determined discourse in literary criticism since the end of the
nineteenth century. That this place is peripheral shows that the institu-
tion of criticism in relation to the press has a decidedly lower priority
than political and economic issues.

As soon as we recognize that the institution of literature consists of
subinstitutions that are relatively autonomous and have histories of
their own, we find that other problems arise. For one, we have to
consider that evolution within the institution of literature can be un-
even. For example, around 1900 the positivistic history of literature
was oriented toward a concept of the literary work that did not corre-
spond to the contemporaneous concept of the artwork within the
avant-garde. Literary history and literary criticism had divergent
norms. It is possible, besides, that different social groups, or classes,
occupied subinstitutions through their respective apparatuses. Al-
though it was impossible, for instance, for the nineteenth-century pro-
letariat to exert any influence over literary history, it could participate
in the discourse of literary criticism by means of the periodicals and
newspapers of working-class parties and unions and articulate its claim
to a literature of its own vis-à-vis the middle-class press. The workers
could never have dominated the institution of criticism at that time, as
the Russian revolutionaries did literary criticism in 1917, but they did acquire a voice and were able to exert an influence on critical debate through important theorists such as Mehring and Lukács.

**Institution and Reading Formation**

Tony Bennett has recently tried to overcome the limitations of Althusser's theory. Although his critique draws primarily on Etienne Balibar and Macherey, his approach differs not insignificantly from French Marxism and in some respects comes close to the work of Raymond Williams, especially in its emphasis on historical concreteness. His objections to Althusser also apply, more than he realizes, to Althusser's students. In Bennett's opinion, abstract structures such as ideology and literature have to be replaced by the concrete practices by which historic individuals express themselves: "What is needed is not a theory of literature as such but a historically concrete analysis of the different relationships which may exist between different forms of fictional writing and the ideologies to which they allude." He rightly objects that a generalized concept of literature is unable to comprehend the multiplicity of historical texts produced in different cultures. Like the predecessors he criticized, Althusser generalized a particular concept of literature, that of the middle class. To escape this danger, Bennett suggests, the concept of literature and literary texts should be defined, in the Marxian sense, as a dialectical relationship between production and consumption: "For the process of the consumption of literary texts is necessarily that of their continuous re-production; that is, of their being produced as different objects for consumption." This argument leads Bennett to conclude that reading, or interpreting, involves more than appropriating an established text and casting new light on it: "The way in which the literary text is appropriated is determined not only by the operations of criticism upon it but also, and more radically, by the whole material, institutional, political and ideological context within which those operations are set."48 This formulation moves in the direction of an institutional determination of literary consumption (whether appropriation, reading, or interpretation).

How can this institutional context be described more specifically? In his *Formalism and Marxism* (1979), Bennett offers a few suggestions, based primarily on the work of Etienne Balibar and Macherey. In his essay "Texts, Readers, Reading Formations" (1983), he tries with the help of linguistic theorems to formulate a theory of reading formation that no longer isolates the process of reading in a positivistic or phe-

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nomenological manner. The category of reading formation has two salient features. First, it brings the active role of reading and interpreting to the fore. That is, a critic does not discover one or more meanings or tensions in a text; rather, his or her reading imposes this meaning on the text. Second, it refers to the sociological and ideological context of any reading. More radically than Etienne Balibar and Macherey, Bennett destabilizes the literary text. In the framework of a reading formation, interpretation takes priority over the text: “Ultimately, there is no such thing as ‘the text.’ There is no pure text, no fixed and final form of the text which conceals a hidden truth which has but to be penetrated for criticism to retire, its task completed. There is no once-and-for-all, final truth about the text which criticism is forever in the process of acquiring. The text always and only exists in a variety of historically concrete forms.” Bennett is obviously in agreement with Macherey and Etienne Balibar, but his emphasis is different. Like Renée Balibar, he assumes the concept of literature is determined by social institutions (for example, schools) that are directly or indirectly concerned with the production and treatment of texts. Thus the acts of reading and interpreting are also activities determined by social institutions (ideological apparatuses, in Althusser’s language) and which in turn determine texts through appropriation and cultural preparation. Thus Bennett distinguishes between a university reading formation—that is, the strategies for treating a literary text practiced in universities—and a popular reading formation, which has to make do without such methodological strategies.

The soundness of this distinction needs to be examined more closely; it certainly cannot be generalized. Bennett’s equation of popular reading with untutored reading for the purpose of contrasting it with tutored university reading presents two problems. For one, it is questionable whether there is such a thing as “untutored reading,” since all reading ability is culturally acquired. Reading depends on schooling, albeit in various forms. For another, the distinction between tutored and untutored reading obscures the implicit class distinction. Tutored reading is not, as Bennett maintains, necessarily identifiable with middle-class reading, and untutored reading is not restricted to the proletariat. The lower middle class is also largely unschooled in literature—even in the twentieth century.

Although Bennett’s classification may be problematic in its particulars, his concept of reading formation is unquestionably fruitful, partic-
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ularly as a needed critique of reception aesthetics, which is restricted to the concept of the implied reader. A Marxian approach, in fact, cannot dispense with the historical reader. This category becomes productive, however, only if it simultaneously breaks with a substantialistic concept of the text (or work) and the recipient. Until this is done, the study of reception remains subordinate to the investigation of the text, and the text continues to be the point of orientation telling the literary scholar which interpretation is more appropriate. The reading would then have the same (reduced) status in relation to the text that in Saussure parole has in relation to langue. But as soon as the act of decoding takes precedence, it becomes necessary to establish a relationship between competing interpretations, which can no longer be measured by the "objectivity" of the text. "It is precisely such a dissolution," writes Bennett, "that I wish to recommend: not the dissolution of the 'text itself' into the million and one readings of individual subjects, however, but rather its dissolution into reading relations and, within those, reading formations that concretely and historically structure the interaction between texts and readers." The relationship between reader and text is accordingly presented as the relationship between the culturally activated reader and the culturally activated text.

Bennett has not yet succeeded in explaining, however, exactly how a reading formation relates to a reading subject and to social institutions. Apparently, the concept of reading formation is systemically situated between reader and institution. Reading subjects are characterized by a particular reading formation; if they lack such a formation, they are totally incapable of decoding a text—and thus of finding any meaning in it. On the other hand, a formation is not something one lights upon; rather, it is the result of institutional practices. A reading formation can thus be understood as the product of practices, conventions, and standards imposed on authors, texts, and readers by an ideological apparatus. This definition would allow us to describe the reading formation of the Gymnasium or university. But in what context could we describe the popular reading formation? Bennett concedes that for the present he has little of a precise nature to say about this reading formation; yet are we really so poorly informed? In the aftermath of Adorno and Horkheimer's description of the culture industry, procedures were developed for analyzing the relationship between the ideological appa-

51 Ibid., p. 16.
ratus and models of reception. The concept of popular reading formation is nevertheless too unspecific for concrete historical analysis, for it describes at least two different situations: on the one hand an older folk culture, on the other a "mass culture" conditioned by capitalism for which Horkheimer and Adorno introduced the concept of the culture industry. Although we are relatively well informed about the older popular reading formation, we have only the basic outlines of the reading formation of the culture industry. We need to investigate in detail how they reacted to each other when they came in contact during the nineteenth century.