25.
Ideology

The way you think, what you think – about society, ethics, politics, justice, about poverty and wealth, about education and the health and welfare systems, about crime and punishment, about human rights, race, religion and ethnicity, unemployment and the minimum wage, about immigration and asylum seekers, sexuality and gender, the environment, the ecosystem and global warming, about war and revolution, about terrorists and freedom fighters – is a matter of language. You make up your mind about these and a host of other questions in and through the words you and others use to describe them. Politicians know this, of course, not least because the politician's job is almost exclusively concerned with talking (and to a lesser extent writing) – in parliament, on TV and radio (if she gets the chance), on the streets and in election campaigns, in her weekly 'surgery', on the telephone, tweeting, on the internet and in blogs, in newspapers, in committees and other meetings. The politician's job is to talk, to manipulate language in order to influence the way others think about and see the world. Her job is all about 'ideology': ideology, the way that people think about their world, is produced and altered in and through language. Language changes, and even creates the social and political world in which we live. Ideology in that sense *is* language. Some readers might even feel that our decision to speak of the politician here as female is itself an instance of ideology – for example, as 'politically correct' language. To have called her a 'him' could likewise, of course, be called 'ideological' (gender-biased, patriarchal, sexist or misogynist just in its assumptions that politicians are, by default, men).

We could illustrate some of these issues through a brief consideration of a few of the political slogans that have washed over us in the last 75 years or so – since radio, TV and more recently the internet established themselves as the dominant ways by which political communication happens, and since politicians developed the knack of producing phrases (political slogans or 'soundbites') that can be extracted, quoted and re-quoted, in and out of context, in order to sum up a policy, a political position, a world view. The following snippets of language may be said to have influenced people's mentalities, their 'ideology', and consequently their social, political and economic world: 'the only thing we have to fear is fear itself' (Franklin D. Roosevelt, 1933); 'We will fight on the beaches' (Winston Churchill, 1940); people have 'never had it so good' (Harold Macmillan, 1957); 'ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country' (John F. Kennedy, 1961); the 'white heat' of the technological revolution (Harold Wilson, 1963); 'I have a dream' (Martin Luther King, 1963); get the government 'off the backs of the people' (Ronald Reagan, 1981); there is 'no such thing' as society (Margaret Thatcher, 1987); 'back to basics' (John Major, 1993); 'tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime' (Tony Blair, 1992); the 'war on terror' (George W. Bush, 2001); 'change we can believe in' (Barack Obama, 2008); 'Make America Great Again!' (Donald Trump, 2016). In fact, of course, political slogans or sound bites are nothing new: pre-TV and radio, the US presidential candidate Abraham Lincoln, for example, used a memorable metaphor from cowboy culture to influence the way people voted: 'Don't swap horses in the middle of the stream' (1864). And the US constitution is itself partly founded on the series of sound bites making up Benjamin Franklin's preamble to the Declaration of Independence of 1776: 'We hold these truths to be

self-evident … all men are created equal … certain unalienable Rights … Life, Liberty and the pursuit of happiness'. But the growth of democracy and of the propagation and dissemination of ideas through new communication technologies in recent years has significantly increased the importance and power of the isolated sound bite.

What do these isolated pieces of language have to do with literature? And what can they tell us about the relationship between literature and ideology? The literary critic and theorist Paul de Man suggests one answer in a statement that has itself become a sound bite, in his 1982 essay 'The Resistance to Theory': 'What we call ideology is precisely the confusion of linguistic with natural reality' (de Man 1986, 11). What de Man seems to be alluding to is the way that, for example, by designating the man with a gun and a balaclava as a 'terrorist' you understand his actions in one way and thereby 'confuse' that naming with the 'reality' of his actions and purpose; but by naming him a 'freedom fighter', you understand him differently, and 'confuse' your phrase with another sense of his 'reality'. 'Ideology' has to do with the attempt to establish one of these ways of talking about the man in the balaclava as the dominant discourse, as the 'hegemony'. Or, to give another example: ideology would be what is at work whenever or wherever anyone assumes, as a 'natural reality', that public institutions (such as hospitals or universities) should and must base themselves on the language of the market and profit-making' rather than, say, the public good or social welfare. De Man's remark places literature, the art of language, at the centre of political or 'ideological' debate: it means that, 'more than any other mode of inquiry', literary criticism and theory (what de Man calls 'the linguistics of literariness') is itself 'a powerful and indispensable tool in the unmasking of ideological aberrations' (de Man 1986, 11).

The word 'ideology' has something of a bad name: the 'crude' Marxist notion of ideology is of 'false consciousness', 'the system of ideas and representations that dominate the mind of a man [*sic*] or a social group' (Althusser 1977, 149), as contrasted with the underlying reality of economic and class relations. The influential theorist Louis Althusser summarizes Marx's notion of ideology by contrasting it with 'the concrete history of concrete material individuals': ideology, instead, is a 'pure dream', it is 'empty and vain' and 'an imaginary assemblage'. 'Ideology', Althusser continues, 'represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence' (Althusser 1977, 151, 153). In classical Marxism – which, as we shall see, Althusser radically develops – ideology is an imagined representation of reality: it is false, distorted by definition. Ideology is not, Terry Eagleton remarks, 'a set of doctrines': rather, it 'signifies the way men [*sic*] live out their roles in class-society, the values, ideas and images which tie them by their social functions and so prevent them from a true knowledge of society as a whole' (Eagleton 1976, 16–17).

From a poststructuralist perspective, the notion of ideology is fundamentally suspect, since it relies on a questionable opposition of true and false, of reality and false consciousness. By this view, ideology appears too easily as a master term for totalizing readings of literary texts. In this chapter, however, we shall attempt to suggest ways in which the work of the neo-Marxist critic Louis Althusser has effectively produced a powerful critical tool by substantially modifying the 'crude' opposition of disguised or distorted representations, on the one hand, and an underlying political and material reality, on the other.

In a well-known essay entitled 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses' (1969), Louis Althusser seeks to describe ways in which the state exerts its power outside such institutions as the army, the courts, the police, and so on – that is to say, in culture and society generally. The central insight of the essay is that ideology is bound up with the constitution of the subject, that 'man is an ideological animal by nature' – meaning that people constitute or define themselves *as humans* through ideology. Althusser argues that

> the category of the subject is constitutive of all ideology, but at the same time … the category of the subject is only constitutive of all ideology insofar as all ideology has the function (which defines it) of 'constituting' concrete individuals as subjects. (Althusser 1977, 160)

To put it simply: subjects – people – make their own ideology at the same time as ideology makes them subjects. The implications of this idea are enormous because it means that 'ideology' goes to the heart of personal identity, of how we conceive ourselves as subjects in the world and all that this involves. Althusser avoids a reductive opposition of ideology and reality by suggesting that ideology *makes* our reality in constituting us as subjects. Ideology, Althusser argues, 'hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects' (162): it calls us or calls to us as subjects and we recognize ourselves as subjects in our response to this call. To become human, to identify oneself as a subject, then, is an effect of ideology. For Althusser, the function of Art generally is, as he remarks in 'A Letter on Art', 'to make us see', and what it allows us to see, what it forces us to see, is 'the ideology from which it is born' (Althusser 1977, 204). What is most terrifying and compelling about this is the fact that being a subject feels so real, so natural – and yet, as Althusser remarks, this very 'reality' or 'naturalness' of being a subject is itself an 'ideological effect'.

This may seem rather heady stuff – if also, as Althusser suggests, terribly real. How can we begin to think about the workings of ideology in literary texts? Etienne Balibar and Pierre Macherey take us some way towards an understanding of the question in their important essay 'On Literature as an Ideological Form' (1981). They argue that literary texts produce the illusion of 'unity'. Such writing is, for them, itself ideological. For Balibar and Macherey a 'material analysis' needs to look for 'signs of contradictions' which appear 'as unevenly resolved conflicts in the text' (87). For these critics, indeed, literature *begins* with 'the imaginary solution of implacable ideological contradictions': literature is there because 'such a solution is impossible' (88). In capitalist society, literature itself is an 'ideological form', both produced by and producing ideology. The task of the critic would be to look beyond the unity that the literary text strives to present, and forcefully to explore the contradictions embedded within it. The strange case of detective fiction illustrates this point very well. The genre produces its own consoling fictions, its own ideology. While we may think of crime as eternally recurring, for example, as an unavoidable function of any sociopolitical context, detective fiction allows us to perceive it as both solvable and the result of the actions of specific, isolated and morally culpable individuals.

The cultural theorist Tony Bennett has argued that a thoroughgoing Althusserian criticism would not simply restore or reveal the contradictions that are already in texts: rather, it would 'read contradictions into the text' in such a way that it would 'effect a work of transformation on those forms of signification which are said to be ideological' (Bennett 1979, 146–7). In this respect, an 'ideological criticism' is not one that understands the reality of a text better. Rather it is criticism that changes the text. Such a reading of, say, an Agatha Christie detective novel would not simply seek to expose ways in which such writing conforms to and reinforces the status quo of bourgeois capitalism. Instead, it would recognize reading as an intervention in and transformation of that text itself. Bennett argues that there can be no notion of '*the* text' underlying any reading: texts have 'historically specific functions and effects' (Bennett 1979, 148), they change in time, and what changes them is reading.

In order to think about some of these points and questions, we shall briefly consider Edgar Allan Poe's story 'The Purloined Letter' (1845). This story, and Poe's earlier 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue' (1841) and 'The Mystery of Marie Roget' (1842–3), are often considered to be the first examples of modern detective fiction. Set in Paris, the narrative concerns a detective named Auguste C. Dupin, who is asked to solve a mystery concerning the theft of a letter from the 'royal apartments'

belonging to ‘a personage of the most exalted station’ (495), that is to say, presumably, the Queen of France. The contents of the letter have the potential to compromise the Queen and leave her open to blackmail. As she is reading the letter she is interrupted by her husband, from whom the letter must be concealed. She does not have time to hide the letter so she lays it on the table as she talks to her husband, relying on the fact that it is *not* concealed to hide the fact that it *must* be concealed. While they are talking, another person, ‘Minister D.’, enters the room, notices the letter and manages to exchange it for a worthless letter that he happens to be holding. The Queen sees this exchange but can do nothing to stop it without drawing attention to the secret letter. She is now open to blackmail and her letter must be discreetly retrieved by the head of the police service. The police have surreptitiously searched Minister D.’s house but have been unable to find the letter. Dupin is asked to help. He goes to the minister’s house and manages to spot the letter, turned inside out, but revealed for all to see, hanging from the minister’s mantelpiece. Later, by returning to the house with a copy of the letter and arranging for the minister to be distracted while he is there, Dupin manages to substitute his copy for the genuine article and retrieve the now doubly purloined letter.

Detective fiction may be understood to have a conservative ideological form because of its generic investment in the restoration of the status quo. A detective story typically involves a disturbance of order in the wake of an originary event of physical violence or theft of property, followed by the re-establishment of order by the discovery of the criminal – after which the jewels are returned or the murderer is punished (or both). Moreover, the genre conventionally relies on the idea of the criminal as an autonomous individual: he or she must be morally responsible for his or her actions and must not be insane (or at least be sane enough to be morally culpable). This is because the genre depends, on the one hand, on an outcome in which society’s and the reader’s desire for moral restitution is fulfilled and, on the other hand, on the detective’s ability rationally to deduce the criminal’s motives. If the criminal is mad, he or she cannot be punished (he or she must be cured), and his or her motives and actions cannot be rationally deduced because they will be, by definition, irrational. Similarly, any critique of society or social institutions is likely to be counterproductive in a work of detective fiction because of the danger that ‘society’, rather than a particular individual, will itself come to be seen as the culprit. This is a dilemma which is particularly acute in, for example, contemporary feminist detective fiction: the novels of such writers as Sara Paretsky, Amanda Cross and Gillian Slovo are concerned as much with exposing the gross injustices of patriarchal society as with finding a specific criminal. In such cases there is a sense in which the criminal cannot finally be punished and the status quo restored because it is that very status quo which is responsible for the crime. Encoded within classic detective fiction, then, is a reactionary political agenda. This ideological form of the genre might be said to be an unspoken but necessary part of any conventional detective story. From this point of view, one could say that ‘The Purloined Letter’ involves the re-establishment of power relations, the assertion of the culprit as autonomous and independent, and the implementation of reason to restore the status quo.

But what is particularly interesting about Poe’s story from this perspective is not so much the way in which it institutes and reinforces the ideological formation of a certain literary genre, as the fact that this formation also entails a number of paradoxes, sites of disturbance and displacement. One of the key elements of the story is the identification of the detective with the criminal. Dupin explains that he was able to discover the letter by identifying himself with Minister D. and, in particular, by identifying the minister’s mode of thinking as both rational and poetic (like Dupin, he is both mathematician and poet). The story establishes what we might call ‘inspired reasoning’ – as contrasted with the rational approach of the regular police – as the characteristic technique for both detective and criminal in detective fiction. But the story also initiates a central paradox of the genre whereby the detective not

only identifies with but is in some ways identical to the criminal. In this sense, it is no accident that the letter is, in fact, 'purloined' twice – once by the minister and once by Dupin. The detective in this story, and in detective fiction more generally, must obey the double bind of identity with, but difference from, the criminal. This intrinsic generic paradox suggests ways in which the ideological conservativism of the genre, its investment in a restoration of the status quo and reinforcement of an absolute distinction between criminal and non-criminal, may be undermined. Similarly, in establishing 'inspired reasoning' as the modus operandi for both detective and criminal, Poe's story opens the way for its own deconstruction. While detective and criminal, author and reader all need to employ reason to attain their ends, such reason is continually disturbed by its 'other', by inspiration or unreason. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that Poe was also obsessed with occultism, spiritualism and the uncanny. Nor is it any surprise to discover that the inventor of Sherlock Holmes, Arthur Conan Doyle, was on the one hand a trained physician and, on the other, a keen amateur in the study of telepathy and the afterlife. The detective in this context combines a doctor's empirical and scientific acumen with a telepath's ability to read the criminal's mind. More generally, detective fiction seems to be continually threatened with its generic other – the gothic, tales of psychic phenomena, spiritualism – as is suggested by such gothic tales as Doyle's *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1902), for example, or such apparently supernatural tales as his 'The Parasite' (1893). Finally, the genre of detective fiction is organized through a precarious relation with social critique. As we have pointed out, classic detective fiction must distance itself from an ideological critique of society that, however, can never be finally erased. Detective fiction can only exist if there are crimes to detect, and if there are crimes to detect society cannot be perfect. Some of the most interesting exponents of detective fiction – Dashiel Hammett, Raymond Chandler, Elmore Leonard, or more recently Paul Auster, William McIlvanney, Sara Paretsky, Philip Kerr, Walter Mosley, Patricia Highsmith, Ian Rankin, Henning Mankell – gain much of their narrative energy from precisely such a tension – the possibility that the constitution of their narratives as detective fiction will be dissolved by their unavoidable engagement in social and political critique.

Our final point concerning Poe's story and its relation to ideology concerns the way in which it is based on the idea that what is most open or revealed, most 'obvious', may itself be the most deceptive or most concealing. The fact that Minister D. conceals the purloined letter precisely by *not* hiding it, by leaving it where all can see it (the place where no one – except Dupin – will look, because it is too exposed), makes 'The Purloined Letter' an allegory of ideological formation. Ideology may be defined in terms of the obvious, in terms of common sense. It is, in the West, 'common sense' that a 'normal' subject or person is autonomous, for example, that crime is the result of individual actions, or that such an individual operates through rational motivation. But at the same time each of these obvious, self-evident or commonsensical points disguises a very specific concept of the self, an ideology.

Rather than offering an escape from ideology, then, literary texts may be considered as places where the structures and fractures of ideology are both produced and reproduced. Literary texts do not simply or passively 'express' or reflect the ideology of their particular time and place. Rather, they are sites of conflict and difference, places where values and preconceptions, beliefs and prejudices, knowledge and social structures are represented and, in the process, opened to transformation.

Further reading

A good brief account of ideology is the entry in Williams, *Keywords* (1976). More recent, more

detailed and exhaustive is Terry Eagleton's *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (1990). Good short introductions to the subject include Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction* (1991), David Hawkes, *Ideology* (1996), James Decker, *Ideology* (2004), and Michael Freeden, *Ideology* (2003). For useful collections of essays, see Eagleton, ed., *Ideology* (1994) and Mulhern, ed., *Contemporary Marxist Literary Criticism* (1992). Althusser's 'Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatuses' (1977) is a basic text for a consideration of the fundamental importance of ideology in the constitution of the human subject. The classic Althusserian account of literature is Macherey's astute and highly readable *A Theory of Literary Production* (1978); see also Balibar and Macherey, 'On Literature as an Ideological Form' (1981). For a more up-to-date account, drawing on numerous Althusser texts post-humously published in French, see Warren Montag, *Louis Althusser* (2003). Those interested in Marxist readings of literature will also gain much from Fredric Jameson's now classic *The Political Unconscious* (1981). For a challenging but illuminating consideration of the question of ideology in the work of Paul de Man, see Andrej Warminksi, *Ideology, Rhetoric, Aesthetics* (2013). A valuable work on the ideology of detective fiction in particular is Stephen Knight's *Form and Ideology in Detective Fiction* (1980). Poe's 'The Purloined Letter' has itself become a site of intense ideological conflict and theoretical speculation following important essays by Lacan and Derrida: see Muller and Richardson, eds, *The Purloined Poe* (1988). There is a helpful account of 'The Ideology of Narrative Fiction' in the online *Living Handbook of Narratology* (www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de).