

*La Critique au service de la révolution.* By MARC ANGENOT. Leuven: Peeters Vrin. 2000. 438 pp. £22.65.

Marc Angenot's book is an extremely well-researched study of the 'machine à juger de la littérature' created by French communist literary criticism of the 1930s. His analyses are based on a systematic study of the literary pages of relevant reviews and newspapers. The corpus includes the French communist journals *L'Humanité*, *Ce Soir*, *Monde* and *Commune*, the Soviet French-language journal *Littérature internationale*, non-aligned but broadly sympathetic publications such as *Europe* and *Vendredi*, and those journals judged by the Party as being in opposition to their own views, such as the surrealist reviews, the publications stemming from Poulaille's proletarian school, and the explicitly non-stalinist left-wing reviews. From these articles Angenot successfully distils not merely a list of individuals' views, but a comprehensible discursive system.

As it promises, this book offers very much more than a litany of the stupidities of the sort of sectarian criticism that condemned Proust and Joyce whilst elevating mediocre writers because their texts expressed the correct message. Angenot's claim is that 'la critique au service de la révolution' (ASDLR) is worthy of study because the problems it poses, namely, the possibility of 'explaining' texts politically and requiring them to bear witness to (a particular view of) the world, are significant for an understanding of modern literature. His expressed aim is to 'comprendre cette axiomatique d'évidence condamnant le modernisme littéraire au nom d'une espérance historique total' (p. 13; original emphasis). Thus it is the mutual lack of intelligibility of modernism and socialist realism that interests him.

Angenot's account of 'la vision communiste du monde' in Chapter 2 is a nuanced presentation of the political polarization of the inter-war years, which contextualizes the arguments to follow. Since he is to define 'la critique ASDLR' as a fundamentally oppositional doctrine, his analysis of the precise terms in which it attempted to dismiss bourgeois literature is crucial. Other forms of bourgeois culture such as theatre, cinema, visual arts, and music are dealt with in an annexe to Chapter 3 that is structurally slightly clumsy. These chapters open up the text's central problematic by showing the slippage within communist discourse from the reasonable position that the admiration of talent should not be totally divorced from an awareness of ideological content, to the much more problematic view that political judgement should, and can, encompass all other judgements.

Having located the roots of the debate on 'la littérature ASDLR' in the French debates of the 1920s over proletarian literature and in the Soviet Proletkult, the book moves on to analyse what 'la critique ASDLR' was proposing to construct. According to Angenot's account, 'la critique ASDLR' was founded on various illusions: the illusion that aesthetic revolution could be subsumed into political revolution; the illusory conflation of a particular version of reality with 'total reality' that socialist realism proposed; the illusion that communist literature freely chose to communicate a particular vision of the world; and the illusion of a theoretical engagement with marxism. On this last, Angenot argues persuasively that 'la critique ASDLR' offered only a thematization of Marx, 'un marxisme d'intention' (p. 275). He ends with an account of the treatment of writers outside the communist fold, discussing the retrospective creation of a communist literary heritage via the adoption of writers such as Balzac and Zola, the 'critique conversionniste' that was applied to writers who were seen to be on the right path but could do better, and the cases of so-called renegades such as Gide, of 'decadents' such as Proust, and of the explicitly fascist writers.

This lengthy analysis produces a very satisfying synthesis of the fundamental elements of 'la critique ASDLR' in the final chapter. Angenot concludes that the misunderstanding between 'la critique ASDLR' and modernism is total. Because it is based on ideological certainty, communism must reject the enigmatic, disorderly modernist text since it betrays a view of the world as unintelligible that is dangerous to communism; thus Drieu becomes paradoxically more acceptable than Proust. For Angenot, it is not possible either completely to unite or completely to divide literature and politics; he finds the thesis of separate domains insufficient. The drama of modern literature is that it is inevitably and inextricably caught up in an oscillation between the two. The modern world wants neither *l'art pour l'art* nor socialist realism: ultimately, a criticism that takes no account of the social and the historical is no more desirable than a criticism that has no other criteria of judgement than this.

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