

# Mediations

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## Editor's Note

### The Proxemics of Reading

The recent "groundswell of support for new ways of reading...seems like good news," Elizabeth Weed argues in a recent issue of *History of the Present*, because "no critical practice can maintain its vitality without continually questioning its theories."<sup>1</sup> But the calls for different reading practices — she has in mind Eve Sedgwick's call for reparative reading and Stephen Best's and Sharon Marcus's "Surface Reading: An Introduction" — only "seem" new because they "rely on rather familiar indictments of the practice of critique."<sup>2</sup> This doesn't mean, however, that Weed thinks the various reconsiderations aren't of critical interest. "What is noteworthy, perhaps," she suggests, "is that the very sources of the indictments are not honed opponents of theory but, rather, former fellow travellers."<sup>3</sup>

One could quarrel with a number of points that Weed makes here: are Sedgwick and the various proponents of surface reading merely offering up versions of "familiar indictments of critique"?<sup>4</sup> Even if this is true, does familiarity necessitate their arriving at the same conclusions? And isn't it just a little uncaring, at this point in theory's history, to divide critics neatly into pro- or anti-theory camps? These matters notwithstanding, Weed's framing of the question in terms of "vitality" characterizes accurately one of the primary reasons why reading practices have (again) become the focus of critical concern: at the core of these reconsiderations of how we read is a deeply felt worry that critical energies have stalled if not become altogether stale. Indeed, one can see both in her invocation of "familiar[ity]" and in her conclusion — which queries whether the "fetishistic thinking" Weed identifies with Sedgwick, Best, and Marcus is the only option available for critics — that what's driving the interest in reading practices is a deeper concern with whether criticism might not be routing such that it ruts itself as fast as it covers new ground.

What Weed captures nicely by connecting up the renewed interest in reading with critical dispensations towards theory is, then, a generational shift underway in literary criticism, one that Best and Marcus acknowledge fully when they note that the contributors to the "Surface Reading" volume all "received doctoral degrees in either English or Comp. Lit after 1983".<sup>5</sup> For in the calls for a renewed approach to reading practices we can see a kind of frustration with both the status quo and the

tried-but-true. If too often one feels a sense of déjà vu while reading literary criticism — the sense that one knows where an argument is headed without having to read too far into it (and without regard to the object under scrutiny) — then the renewed attention to reading strategies has, at the very least, offered up ideas about how we might shake up our practices going forward.

Critics with a materialist bent need not be terribly troubled by thinkers like Best and Marcus pointing out that ours is a different historical moment than the previous generation's, or by their reminding us to pay attention to questions of surface. For even the most dialectical thinker would, I think, agree that there has been a greater concern with the less obvious than the readily discernable. And there is certainly something to be made of their claim that ideologues have become increasingly comfortable with making the consequences of their ideas transparent.<sup>6</sup> So while one might quarrel about the degree to which “deep” readings disregard the obvious and the pervasiveness of this new forthrightness, their point is to be taken.

One might take issue, however, with the style in which their points get made. Best and Marcus are rather breezy in their dispensing of modes of criticism that are a little more varied and thoughtful in approach than their characterization in their “Introduction.” They are careful to say that the essays collected in the “Surface Reading” special issue represent “neither a polemic against nor a postmortem of symptomatic reading” but the critical response — traceable in the footnotes of the essays in this dossier — suggests that relatively few readers have taken this claim as seriously (despite its being on the surface).<sup>7</sup> One of the many virtues of the essays in this dossier is that they resist the temptation to adopt a defensive stance and instead take up the challenge of attempting to sharpen materialist reading practices. And for this surface readers should be grateful. Just as Franco Moretti's distant readings require many close readings to make the analyses pop, surface readings will pay only when positioned against equally adept critiques working at various “depths.”<sup>8</sup>

So although we work in institutions that demand and reward work that garners the most attention — either by repudiating the critical past or by insisting on a particular future — these essays show why we might be at least as well served by work that patiently and modestly incorporates ideas past and present, dormant and current.<sup>9</sup> Contributors were not charged with taking up any of the recent discussions about reading nor were they asked to incite radical transformations.<sup>10</sup> Rather, they were asked simply to write short essays about materialist reading practices without constraint. To this end, the hope has been that their efforts will not only ensure that critics with a materialist bent are part of the larger conversation about reading but also the reshaping of critical practice going forward.

Jason Potts, for the *Mediations* Editors

## Notes

1. Elizabeth Weed, "The Way We Read Now," *History of the Present* 2:1 (2012): 95. I'm grateful to Mathias Nilges, Emilio Sauri, Nicholas Brown, and Jen Hedler Phillis for their assistance in bringing this dossier to print.
2. Weed, "Way" 95.
3. "Way" 95.
4. It is worth noting that though most discussions of surface reading treat the idea as though it is uniform in practice, there are considerable variances in the reading practices of the contributors to the *Representations* special issue. Best and Marcus deserve a little leeway for having to write an introduction that has to account for these differences. In short, we could all be better (and more generous) readers.
5. Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, "Surface Reading: An Introduction," *Representations* 108:1 (2009) 1.
6. Best and Marcus, "Surface Reading" 2.
7. "Surface Reading" 3.
8. For all the interest in reading at the surface, in depth, close up, far away, and at different speeds, no one, to my knowledge, has explained how this translates into a pedagogical practice. The teaching of close reading had a deeply democratic impulse behind it. That impulse, it seems to me, hasn't been sustained subsequently (or at least as intensively).
9. Dan Stout and I make a longer version of this approach in *Theory Aside* (Durham: Duke UP, 2014).
10. It should be noted that Jason Baskin's essay's origins did come out of an MLA seminar devoted to materialist responses to the questions the *Representations* issue generated. Charles Sumner's revised contribution to that seminar is now in print in *Diacritics* 40:3 (2012): 26-55.





## Soft Eyes: Marxism, Surface, and Depth

Jason M. Baskin

"You know what you need at a crime scene? Soft eyes. You got soft eyes, you can see the whole thing. You got hard eyes, you staring at the same tree, missing the forest."<sup>1</sup>

Trained to see objects of perception as traces of an absent event, the detective remains a prototypical figure for practices of critical reading, particularly the "hermeneutics of suspicion" that have lately come under scrutiny.<sup>2</sup> Critics have begun recently to question the continuing efficacy of the pervasive reliance on interpretive models that take meaning to be "hidden, repressed, deep, and in need of detection and disclosure."<sup>3</sup> They point out that suspicion has become second nature to literary critics who only know how to approach the text as an illusion or secret to be "exposed."<sup>4</sup> Prizing detachment, distance, and abstraction, suspicious reading assumes a negative, even "adversarial" relation to the text that fails to make room for other, more affirmative responses, which might be equally valuable.<sup>5</sup> Many advocates of moving beyond suspicious reading believe that its goals — critique and demystification — are no longer as politically efficacious as they once seemed.<sup>6</sup> They claim that suspicion may have outlived its usefulness and needs at least to be supplemented, if not replaced altogether, by other forms of engagement.

Of the critiques briefly outlined above, perhaps the most compelling — and certainly the most wide-ranging — attempt to conceptualize an alternative to the "hermeneutics of suspicion" is "surface reading," formulated by Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus in their introduction to a 2009 special issue of *Representations*. Best and Marcus note that the forms of suspicion and critique recently questioned by scholars such as Eve Sedgwick, Michael Warner, and Rita Felski, among others, are underwritten by a hermeneutic of depth that has remained a fundamental assumption of literary and cultural analysis since the 1970s. They argue that the most decisive and influential expression of this depth hermeneutic is the model of "symptomatic reading" Fredric Jameson theorized through an amalgam of Marxism

and psychoanalysis in *The Political Unconscious* (1981). Because symptomatic reading seeks a “latent meaning behind a manifest one” it proceeds on the assumption that “the most interesting aspect of a text is what it represses,” not its “literal meaning.”<sup>7</sup> They insist that in order to retrieve what has been lost through this pervasive focus on depth, readers should instead “attend to the surfaces of texts.” For Best and Marcus, symptomatic reading perpetuates a “heroic” vision of the critic’s role. By aligning reading with perception rather than interpretation, surface readers seek only the “minimal critical agency” that emerges from “attentiveness” to literal meaning and surface appearance through, for instance, “accurate” or “neutral” description of the text. “[W]hat lies in plain sight,” they argue, “is worthy of attention but often eludes observation — especially by deeply suspicious detectives who look past the surface in order to root out what is underneath it.”<sup>8</sup>

Surface reading has tapped into an apparently widespread frustration with the long-standing critical neglect of what seems most apparent — and perhaps even most engaging or pleasurable — in literary and cultural objects. Indeed, many scholars sympathize with Best’s and Marcus’s feeling that a reductive, knee-jerk impulse toward demystification has become an overly familiar, even inert, critical gesture and that readers today need to engage in more varied ways with the objects they analyze. Despite an avowed methodological pluralism, however, Best’s and Marcus’s rejection of depth poses severe limitations to any mode of analysis — particularly Marxist analysis — that explores the agency of cultural production or critical practice by locating these activities within a socio-historical totality.<sup>9</sup> Crystal Bartolovich and others have convincingly responded by pointing out that the commitment to this critical project remains absolutely vital today.<sup>10</sup>

I support these defenses of suspicion and critique and agree that Best’s and Marcus’s analysis of symptomatic reading misses its target in crucial ways that need to be addressed.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, the emergence of surface reading reveals a need not only to defend but to reimagine and extend these Marxist critical commitments through new models of reading. This is not only a question of employing specific methodologies or affirming particular political positions, though these are both important topics of discussion. It is necessary also to consider how we conceptualize the nature of both the textual object and the act of reading. The separation of surface and depth, attention and suspicion that generally has underpinned the debate over surface reading inhibits Marxist analysis. Instead of articulating “new” methods of reading, we need to think more carefully about the ontology of that which is read. Marxist criticism needs to produce conceptual models for reading that foreground the relation between surface and depth, cultural text and socio-historical totality. This effort is particularly important today, at a moment when a Marxist critical orientation is as relevant and necessary as ever, yet theoretical debate within the academy is increasingly pluralized and unmoored.

Drawing on the ideas of the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty and the Marxist cultural theorist Raymond Williams, in this essay I put forward the concept of “soft eyes” in order to develop one such model of critical engagement. Exploring what he calls “the originality of depth,” Merleau-Ponty argues that the object of perception cannot be separated into “surface” and “depth” because in embodied experience they are interrelated.<sup>12</sup> Depth provides the very thickness and texture that allow surfaces to be perceived. Though he likely never read Merleau-Ponty, Williams grasps this phenomenological insight when he argues that totality should not be conceived of as an object of focus in itself. Rather, totality is the constitutive dimension of the act of reading. It makes reading possible because it includes both reader and text in a whole social and historical process. Marxism, then, is not neglectful of surface details at all. Its depth hermeneutic makes possible a form of acute perception that not only engages surface, but does so more fully than surface reading itself. Because “soft eyes” perceive the interrelation of “surface” and “depth,” they take in the critical relation to social totality on which Marxist criticism depends. “Soft eyes” thus offer one possibility for sustaining the values of critique and suspicion amid what Timothy Bewes has identified as the recent “decline of the symptom.”<sup>13</sup>

My use of the phrase “soft eyes” aims to revise Best’s and Marcus’s characterization of critical readers as “suspicious detectives” who neglect the text’s surface. I take the phrase from a scene in the television series *The Wire* in which the veteran Baltimore homicide detective Bunk Moreland trains a rookie detective, Kima Greggs, to work a murder scene. Later in the season, Kima returns to the crime scene and locates a crucial piece of evidence by following Bunk’s advice: “You got soft eyes, you can see the whole thing. You got hard eyes, you staring at the same tree, missing the forest.”<sup>14</sup> Kima finds this piece of evidence (a bullet) not by surveying the crime scene from the outside, but physically entering and inhabiting it. She imitates physical movements the suspects might have made, tracks minute and seemingly random details, and follows out multiple lines of sight. From this active and embodied perspective, she ultimately locates the bullet, which she cannot see directly because it is lodged *inside* a block of wood.

So what kind of reader is Kima? Clearly, she is not fixated only on the “hard” and immediate surfaces of objects. Yet she also does not merely ignore the surface to “plumb hidden depths.”<sup>15</sup> I want to suggest that surface reading cannot account for Kima’s discovery because it is predicated on a fundamental separation of surface from depth. Kima’s discovery is only possible because depth is not, as Best and Marcus assume, a separate space located “behind” the object’s surface. Since perception is a bodily process that takes place in a whole, three-dimensional world, even surfaces have depths that cannot be seen, yet still can be accessed. By inhabiting the constitutive three-dimensionality of space and any perceivable object in it, Kima recognizes that depth is what makes surfaces available for perception in the first place. Thus she does not venture “behind” or “beneath” the surface. Rather, she sees *into* surfaces, in order

to access the depths of surface itself. Her success shows that “suspicious detectives” don’t neglect the surface for hidden depths, but work “softly” through depth to engage surface more fully.

### The Originality of Depth

The notion that successful reading requires “soft eyes” means that despite the limitations of surface reading, Best’s and Marcus’s turn to the category of perception in order to reconceptualize the act of reading can be surprisingly useful — just not in the way they intend. In order to correct the bias towards hermeneutic depth and redirect readers to what is immediately available, given, and manifest, surface reading replaces interpretation with perception. Many of the responses to surface reading have highlighted the preference for attentive description over critical interpretation, but none have considered the particular model of perception that makes possible this recourse to surface description in the first place. While Best and Marcus clearly define their concept of surface, they don’t address the model of perception that underpins it:

[W]e take surface to mean what is evident, perceptible, apprehensible in texts; what is neither hidden nor hiding; what, in the geometrical sense, has length and breadth but no thickness, and therefore covers no depth. A surface is what insists on being looked *at* rather than what we must train ourselves to see *through*.<sup>16</sup>

Perception, here, describes a primarily passive encounter with immediate physical appearance. The object of perception is flat: it has “length and breadth but no thickness.” By construing the perceived object to be a concrete, two-dimensional presence fully visible to the perceiving subject, Marcus and Best present surface in such a way as to make the engagement with depth (through interpretation) unnecessary. Completely lacking depth, the object can be said to have a “literal meaning” that can be mimetically represented simply through an “accurate” description.<sup>17</sup> This concept of perception renders the object mere surface while relegating depth to a space separate from (beyond, or behind) the object.

Perception, however, may not be so wedded to the surface of things as all of this suggests. In fact, phenomenology offers an alternative to this naturalized, “objective” understanding of perception as akin to a photographic reproduction.<sup>18</sup> Perception, Merleau-Ponty argues, is an embodied activity: not a detached representation of the world but a fully immersed, three-dimensional mode of bodily engagement. In order to see anything at all, one must be physically “situated” in a whole spatio-temporal environment composed of innumerable points of view.<sup>19</sup> One never sees an object from all sides at once, but only from a particular point of orientation within the same world. There is always a hidden aspect of the object, e.g., its back side. From the traditional, objective perspective, this is a merely contingent product of

one's limited point of view. These visual gaps are simply absences that one's brain unconsciously fills in, for instance by imagining another viewpoint on the object. But Merleau-Ponty argues that these absences retain a concrete and productive presence within the field of vision. What one sees depends on what *cannot* be seen. "We must recognize the indeterminate as a positive phenomenon," Merleau-Ponty writes: "there occurs here an *indeterminate vision, a vision of something or other*, and, to take the extreme case, what is behind my back [or the back side of the object] is not without some element of visual presence."<sup>20</sup> As Francisco Varela explains, phenomenology rejects a fundamental assumption of the traditional, objective worldview: "the sort of determinateness one finds in physical objects must not be assumed a priori to be applicable to perceptual experience."<sup>21</sup>

The incompleteness that defines Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological account of perception entails an alternative understanding of surface and depth from that presented by Best and Marcus. The opacity of perception is a direct result of the fact that, because the eye (indeed the perceiving subject as a whole) is part of the field of vision, depth is an essential, structural condition of perception. Best's and Marcus's pure, flat surface — "with length and breadth but no thickness," immediately available to perceptual "attentiveness" — is an idealized abstraction that can only exist in thought. By contrast, phenomenology recognizes that because perception takes place in three-dimensional, lived space rather than in some ideal, objective space, any perceivable surface is both immediately present and, at the same time, latent, mysterious. Embodied perception, Merleau-Ponty argues, is always "thickened" by the negativity of these "indeterminate presences," the aspects of the object that cannot be seen, but have a presence in the perceptual field.<sup>22</sup> The irreducible "thickness" of surface is what Merleau-Ponty calls the "originality of depth."<sup>23</sup> Depth differs from the "geometrical" dimensions of length and breadth highlighted by Best and Marcus, which simply define objective position in space. For Merleau-Ponty, by contrast, depth does not refer to location in space: it is the fundamental, structural property of space itself.<sup>24</sup> Though depth can be measured like length and breadth, unlike these other dimensions it performs a more essential function, one not captured by objective measurement: depth constitutes the world as a "thickened" social space that subjects inhabit and explore but can never exhaust.

By recognizing the "originality of depth," phenomenology discloses the "indissoluble link between things and myself" that makes perception possible, revealing the viewer to be actively "involved" in the world rather than a detached observer.<sup>25</sup> Depth is a consequence of the fact that one does not experience the world from the outside, but only from within it. Yet the "originality" of depth means that neither subject nor object are simply "in" the world: in fact, each is part of it. Depth is therefore the source of that "tacit sense of belonging" that comes with one's inhabitation of a whole lived world that includes innumerable points of view.<sup>26</sup> It is what characterizes perceptual experience as not only embodied but also social and historical.<sup>27</sup> Because it takes



place in depth, for Merleau-Ponty perception is more than the mere presentation of a discrete object to an isolated subject: it opens the subject to a whole social and historical world — a totality — on which subject, object and the act of perception all depend. Properly understood as a spatial dimension, depth thus marks the presence of social totality as the medium through which both subjects and objects (readers and texts) are actively constituted.<sup>28</sup> Surface reading loses sight of totality as this constitutive dimension of reading because Best and Marcus rely on a naturalized, objective model of perception in which the immediacy of surface is abstracted out from a depth that remains mere background. Therefore, though Best and Marcus assert that surface reading is “not antithetical to critique,” their separation of surface from depth — the separation of the text from the social totality that constitutes it — erodes any basis upon which social critique could be sustained.<sup>29</sup> By contrast, the phenomenological approach that underpins my concept of “soft eyes” offers an alternative model in which surface and depth are mutually intertwined.

Though Best and Marcus derive their concept of surface and depth from Jameson’s symptomatic reading, Jameson’s work also includes this phenomenological concept of depth articulated by Merleau-Ponty. Returning to Jameson’s definition of the “political unconscious” with this phenomenological emphasis in mind, it becomes apparent that he collapses these two incommensurable models of the text. As Jameson explains: “the literary structure, far from being completely realized on any one of its levels, tilts powerfully into the underside of *impensé* or *non-dit*, in short, into the very political unconscious, of the text.”<sup>30</sup> However, the “underside” of an object is *not* a separate “level” of a structure: an object with sides and a multi-leveled structure imply two different models of surface and depth. A multi-leveled structure — a more familiar critical conception of the textual object — implies the separation of surface from depth. This allows for the possibility of a surface reading, in which the surface of the text becomes a distinct object of focus from the social totality that lurks “behind” it.<sup>31</sup> However, by contrast, locating the text’s political unconscious on the “underside” of the object emphasizes the “originality of depth,” the constitutive interrelation between surface and depth that emerges in perceptual experience. The “underside” of the object is the aspect of the object that is necessarily hidden from view because perception always takes place from a particular point of orientation in a whole, “thick” three-dimensional environment. Rather than a simple absence hidden beneath a surface presence, the “underside” of the object has an “indeterminate presence” in the field of vision. Thus, instead of separating the object into distinct levels, surface and depth remain intertwined, as they are in lived experience.

“Soft eyes” engage depth as this constitutive dimension of the object, rather than as mere background, or a separate level of a structure. Let’s recall that Kima finds the bullet *inside* a block of wood. Objects have front and back sides, and therefore an inside, only because depth is the constitutive dimension of space, rather than a separate object or position (a “level”) located *in* space. Therefore, it would be wrong to

say that in locating the bullet, Kima ventures “beyond,” “behind,” or even “through” the surface to locate the bullet “hidden” “beneath” it. Rather, the object’s surface is inextricable from its depth. Surface reading cannot access this space because Best and Marcus understand surface as purely flat (without sides, surface has inside, no depth). Kima’s “soft eyes” see that depth is not the hidden background of surface appearance but the constitutive dimension — depth — of surface itself.

Kima’s success suggests that totality is best understood not as a distinct level of reality on which the reader can focus — and ultimately map, as Jameson has put it — but the spatial dimension that constitutes the object itself. “Soft eyes” recognize that depth makes the surface of the text available to apprehension (reading) in the first place. I take this to be the force of Marxist conceptions of totality, including Jameson’s. Successful detection, the reconstruction or unfolding of a text’s meaning and significance depends on an awareness of totality (“the ability to see the whole thing”), the larger whole through which surface takes on presence and meaning. Surface reading forecloses this awareness through its separation of surface and depth. Rather than moving beyond surface details into a detached and epistemologically secure critical “metalanguage,” “soft eyes” grasp these details as pieces connected within a larger, structured whole that determines the limitations and possibilities of any critical reading.<sup>32</sup>

### Learning to See

As far as I know, Raymond Williams never encountered Merleau-Ponty’s theory of perception. Nevertheless, Williams develops a concept of socio-historical totality that carries through the implications of a phenomenology of perceptual depth. Like Merleau-Ponty, Williams recognized the active, embodied, and fundamentally social nature of perception: “each of one us,” he pointed out, “*has to learn to see*.”<sup>33</sup> Williams argued that perception does not record objective data but actively constitutes the object through a complex negotiation that involves the evolution of the human organism together with the individual’s previous perceptual experiences and the social codes (the rules of interpretation) one has already learned. Without the interpretive structures provided by actually lived social relationships — the “depth” immanent to perception — one cannot register the “literal meaning” of the immediately given surface of things; one would simply be blind.<sup>34</sup> There is no such thing, for Williams or for Merleau-Ponty, as a straightforward or literal descriptive account. Description already includes both interpretation and creative production; it partially creates the reality it “describes” because description depends on the immersion of both subject and object in a whole social process.

Williams’s insight that even the most basic and seemingly subjective experience of perception is an active social production, a process of communication and learning that involves a whole social world, had far-reaching consequences for the theory of cultural materialism he develops from the early 1960s through the late 1970s. Most



famously in his essay “Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory,” Williams argues that Marxist cultural analysis has been perennially hampered by a problem of surface and depth: a dualistic and mechanistic separation of base and superstructure, production and reproduction, in which the cultural object is conceived separately from — and a mere “reflection” of — the more fundamental productive forces that organize social life.<sup>35</sup> For Williams, writing in the 1970s, this dualist error is reinforced by formalist tendencies within contemporary Marxism, namely the importation of Althusser’s structuralist Marxism into the British intellectual Left. Williams regards structuralist Marxism as tending toward a treatment of social or superstructural depth as merely another level of reality, rather than a constitutive dimension — a whole social process — through which subject and object are related. From Williams’s perspective, then, the problem with “symptomatic reading” and the “hermeneutics of suspicion” becomes, *pace* Best and Marcus, not an excessive investment in social or historical depth but a reduction of depth simply to another level of surface. Surface reading then compounds this error by attempting to return to surface, which it imagines as separate from depth. In other words, inasmuch as both symptomatic and surface reading seek to differentiate and separate depth from surface rather than theorize their indissoluble connectivity, they both reinforce a dualism that separates the reader from the text and both from the world. No mode of attentiveness can bridge this gap.<sup>36</sup>

For Williams, a phenomenological view of perception (though he did not call it that) works against this tendency towards dualism by dispensing with the concept of reflection altogether and revealing instead a whole, three-dimensional social process. As we saw, Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology uncovers the totality that makes possible the seemingly punctual moment of perception. Williams’s cultural theory moves in the same direction. He wants critical analysis to unfold the social processes that constitute the text as an “object” in the first place. “[I]t is not the base and the superstructure that need to be studied,” Williams argues, “but specific and indissoluble real processes.”<sup>37</sup> This leads Williams to conceptualize the “object” of analysis as a historically situated practice. “Now I think the true crisis in cultural theory,” he states, “is between [the] view of the work of art as object and the alternative view of art as a practice.”<sup>38</sup> The concept of practices necessitates the idea of social totality. But totality here becomes immanent to a cultural product — a dimension of the object of analysis, not a separate plane of reality beyond it. Understanding totality in these terms depends on recognizing that depth is a constitutive dimension of the textual object: not its mere “background,” but something more like its “back side,” the part of the object that remains within one’s visual experience, even though it cannot be seen. For Williams, approaching cultural objects as historically situated practices captures this constitutive three-dimensionality: “what we are actively seeking is the true practice which has been alienated to an object, and the true conditions of practice...which have been alienated to components or mere background.”<sup>39</sup> For Williams, as for Merleau-

Ponty, in the act of reading/perception, the object loses its determination and the critic recognizes the totality that constitutes both the object and her relation to it.

Foreclosing the separation of surface from depth, Williams's move from objects to practices locates agency within both the cultural text and critical reading. Reading, Williams has reminded us, is as "active as writing."<sup>40</sup> But he does not assign the critic a heroic autonomy or epistemological security above and beyond the text. This is why he insists that the move from objects to practices may not produce a coherent methodology — a specific "way we read," as Best and Marcus put it.<sup>41</sup> Williams argues that, by giving up the "built-in procedure" that comes out of identifying an object of analysis, critics can better grasp the relationality of all social practices — from simple perception to reading, writing, and political organization — within a structured social totality.<sup>42</sup> Critical reading can by no means replace, nor can it be "equate[d]" with, political activism.<sup>43</sup> But they are related practices: "the whole point of thinking in terms of totality," Williams points out, "is the realization that we are part of it; that our own consciousness, our work, our methods, are then critically at stake."<sup>44</sup>

The idea of "soft eyes" aims to bring Williams's recognition that totality means "we are part of it" into critical practice today. Williams's statement necessitates that totality can be grasped not solely as an object seen from the outside, from an objective "bird's eye view" — as a map, for instance. Rather, totality can also be grasped phenomenologically — from the *inside*, in other words — by unpacking the ways that it already necessarily limits and conditions one's perspective. This phenomenological reorientation does not render the contingency of one's position absolute, but works in the opposite direction, toward the recognition of the conditions under which all practices, all forms of agency and action are both limited and made possible. Rather than the result of the heroic act of critical reading — something the critic adds to or extracts from the text — totality is what makes reading possible in the first place. Totality puts our methods of reading in question, but in so doing it renders them significant.

This allows us to imagine reading as a form of agency that is not limited to either of the options imagined by Best and Marcus: the "heroic" "freedom dream [of] demystification" (symptomatic reading) or the "minimal critical agency" of mere "attentiveness" (surface reading).<sup>45</sup> Best and Marcus assume that agency necessitates a heroic freedom from constraint that allows the symptomatic reader to reveal the totality lurking behind the text. When surface reading gives up this "freedom dream," critical agency becomes attenuated. Yet, this logic presumes that agency is underwritten by a prior freedom from constraint. What if agency is not predicated on freedom, but rather is itself freedom's precondition? Seeing totality through "soft eyes" does not privilege the critic's heroic freedom, nor does it settle for a minimal agency. It uncovers the irreducible social and historical conditions that both limit and make possible the act of reading. "Soft eyes" affirm the agency of both critical reading and cultural production not on the basis of a putative freedom, but as a product of

location within a larger social and historical totality.

“Soft eyes” would animate any reading driven by this recognition of totality as a process that constitutes — rather than simply constrains — the critical agency of reader or text. Yet I want to refrain here from suggesting that “soft eyes” entails a specific method of reading at all (i.e., “soft reading”). Instead, I would like the idea of “soft eyes” to remain something like a guiding principle based on the insight registered above: critical reading does not reveal totality as if from the outside but uses the concept of totality (“think[s] in terms of totality”) to grasp the limitations and possibilities of any reading of a text at a particular historical moment. We might productively locate useful tools or methods in any number of places, including in those critics working expressly within the tradition of suspicion and symptomatic reading as well as those working outside of it.

Not as method, then, “soft eyes” can serve instead to reorient the currently proliferating methods and modes of reading towards the horizon of totality that they often explicitly abjure. The question of how to respond to the increasing variety of reading practices that are currently laying claim to (or being claimed by) post-critical, post-suspicious, or post-symptomatic approaches is crucial to contemporary Marxist criticism. As I noted earlier, surface reading has proven so influential at least in part because it embraces the expanding methodological pluralism of the present — the wide variety of methods and practices that constitute “the way we read now.”<sup>46</sup> Here, Williams’s point about giving up a “built-in procedure” for cultural analysis becomes significant. Certainly, one must defend precisely the value and complexity of the methods of symptomatic and suspicious reading that Best and Marcus critique. Yet it will also prove worthwhile to work on another front to channel the energies, methods, and insights of surface reading, and other emerging scholarly modes, in a more critical direction.<sup>47</sup>

Thus, I have undertaken here to show that surface cannot be separated from — or conceived without — depth. Merleau-Ponty and Williams both remind us that to focus on surface in isolation would not make us “attentive” readers, but simply blind. What we see with “soft eyes” is the central place of totality to any act of reading. Marxist thought and criticism will remain a depth hermeneutic. But as such, Marxism is actually the best means of engaging surface most fully. I would suggest that surface readers like Best and Marcus take Bruno Latour’s often-cited call to move “closer” to objects of study less literally.<sup>48</sup> As new modes of post-symptomatic reading increasingly look to take up questions of significance and attachment — what Latour has called “matters of concern,” rather than “matters of fact” — it becomes increasingly important to insist that this is not best accomplished by the pursuit of immediacy, the “hard eyes” that look ever more closely at the surface. It is only possible “to see more clearly” by learning to read with “soft eyes” that can grasp the complex, dynamic, and structured social totality through which reader and text are related.<sup>49</sup> Reading needs to come closer to the insights of Marxist analysis, not farther away.

## Notes

1. David Simon, "Refugees," dir. Jim McKay, 2006, *The Wire*, season 4, episode 4.
2. The phrase is from Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1977). Recent essays that take up the critique of suspicion discussed here include Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, "Surface Reading: An Introduction," *Representations* 108:1 (Fall 2009): 1-21; Rita Felski, "After Suspicion," *Profession* (2009): 28-39, and *The Uses of Literature* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008); Michael Warner, "Uncritical Reading," *Polemic: Critical or Uncritical*, ed. Jane Gallop (New York: Routledge, 2004) 13-38; Eve Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You," *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke UP, 2003) 123-53.
3. Best and Marcus, "Surface" 1.
4. Sedgwick, "Paranoid" 138-42.
5. "Surface" 16; Felski, "Suspicion" 33-34; Warner, "Uncritical" 13-15.
6. "Paranoid" 123-24 and 139-41; "Surface" 2.
7. Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1981) 60, quoted in "Surface" 3.
8. "Surface" 1, 5, 17, 13, 18. Best and Marcus characterize surface readers as "skeptical about the very possibility of radical freedom and dubious that literature or its criticism can explain our oppression or provide the keys to our liberation" (2).
9. The speed with which the concept of surface reading has caught on is due at least in part to Best's and Marcus's effort to link up with as many different modes of scholarship available, both new and old, including affect and ethics; the return to aesthetics; New Formalism; close reading and New Criticism; the material text and history of the book; literal and descriptive forms of reading; and discourse analysis. All of these and more are, according to Best and Marcus, possible resources for surface readers. I will return the significance of surface reading's apparent methodological flexibility in my conclusion.
10. See Crystal Bartolovich, "Humanities of Scale: Marxism, Surface Reading — and Milton," *PMLA* 127:1 (January 2012): 115-21, and Suvir Kaul, "Reading, Constraint, and Freedom," *Eighteenth Century* 54:1 (Spring 2013): 129-32.
11. For insightful explorations of these questions, see Ellen Rooney, "Live Free or Describe: The Reading Effect and the Persistence of Form," *differences* 21:3 (2010): 112-39, and Timothy Bewes, "Reading with the Grain: A New World in Literary Criticism," *differences* 21:5 (2010): 1-33. I believe that Best and Marcus overstate Jameson's commitment to depth and fail to recognize the attention symptomatic reading accords to the text's surface. Specifically, Best and Marcus ignore the extent to which Jameson and Althusser both presume — though they perhaps do not always foreground sufficiently — the relation between surface and depth. The goal of this essay is to produce an alternative conceptual model of reading that centers on the constitutive interrelation of surface and depth.
12. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge, 2002 [1965]) 308.
13. For reasons I will discuss in my conclusion, I consciously avoid the temptation to counter surface reading with a specific method, i.e. "soft reading." Rather, I want to consider what can be gained from attending not to specific, practical questions of method and analysis, but rather to the conceptualization of the act of reading and its object. As Williams has pointed out, these models can limit possibilities for analysis

in surprising ways, sometimes working against the very aims of a particular methodology. And I take Marxism's critical strength to lie not in a dogmatic adherence to a particular method, but in its flexibility and openness to changing approaches and the variety of forms of knowledge that can contribute to a critique of the present.

14. This phrase actually recurs several times throughout the season in a variety of contexts, including as the title of an earlier episode. As Patrick Jagoda points out, the "soft eyes" trope is one of several cues to the viewer that the show's complex depiction of American society requires a particularly demanding form of attention. See Patrick Jagoda, "Wired," *Critical Inquiry* 38 (Autumn 2011): 190.
15. "Surface" 18.
16. "Surface" 9.
17. "Surface" 12.
18. For Merleau-Ponty's discussion of the objective viewpoint, see the chapter entitled "Experience and Objective Thought," in Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology* 77-84.
19. *Phenomenology* 114-15.
20. *Phenomenology* 7, 6. For useful accounts of Merleau-Ponty's theory of perception, see Taylor Carman, "Sensation, Judgement and the Phenomenal Field" and "Seeing Things in Merleau-Ponty," in *The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty*, eds. Taylor Carman and Mark B. N. Hansen (Cambridge: Cambridge UP) 50-73 and 74-110.
21. Evan Thompson, Alva Noë, and Luis Pessoa, "Perceptual Completion: A Case Study in Phenomenology and Cognitive Science," in *Naturalizing Phenomenology: Issues in Contemporary Phenomenology and Cognitive Science*, ed. Jean Petitot, Francisco J. Varela, Bernard Pachoud, and Jean-Michel Roy (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2000) 191.
22. Merleau-Ponty emphasizes the "thickness" of perception throughout *Phenomenology of Perception*, but for the "thickness" of depth in particular, see 309-10. Merleau-Ponty's late work expands on this idea by developing the idea of "the fold" in an ontological direction. See "The Intertwining—The Chiasm," in *The Visible and the Invisible* (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1968) 130-56.
23. *Phenomenology* 298, 308-10.
24. Merleau-Ponty insists that to grasp the specificity of the embodied experience of space, philosophy has to learn to speak of a phenomenological "spatiality of situation" rather than an objective "spatiality of position." *Phenomenology* 114-15.
25. *Phenomenology* 308, 298, 311.
26. William Connolly, "Materialities of Experience," in *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, Politics*, ed. Samantha Frost and Diana Coole (Durham: Duke UP, 2010) 192-93. Though I draw this useful phrase from Connolly's recent discussion of Merleau-Ponty, I want to point out that Connolly's understanding of belonging differs fundamentally from Merleau-Ponty's in that it remains a relation between discrete individuals. He does not recognize the social totality that, for Merleau-Ponty, negates any notion of the individual. This aspect of Merleau-Ponty's thought — and indeed his Marxism more generally — is often elided in recent critical invocations of his philosophy (see note 28 below).
27. Merleau-Ponty explores this implicit but fundamental sociality more thoroughly in his late, unfinished work collected in *The Visible and the Invisible*. Recent readers have begun to return to this late work in order to correct longstanding assumptions about the latent subjectivism of Merleau-Ponty's philosophical



project. See, for instance, Diana Coole, *Merleau-Ponty and Modern Politics after Anti-Humanism* (Lanham: Rowan and Littlefield, 2007), and R. Radhakrishnan, *History, the Human, and the World Between* (Durham: Duke UP, 2008).

28. For an analysis of the concept of totality in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, in the context of the broader Western Marxist tradition, see Martin Jay, *Marxism and Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas* (Berkeley: U California P, 1984) 361-84. My argument that a phenomenology of perception depends on the concept of social totality stands in direct contrast to Rita Felski's recent turn to "neo-phenomenology" as a way of "venturing beyond the safe haven of skepticism, suspicion, and critique." For Felski, phenomenology offers a mode of surface reading "ideally suited to thick descriptions of the intensities of affective and corporeal response." I argue instead that phenomenology reinforces the constitutive interrelation of readers and texts within a social totality, which sustains critique. Felski, "Everyday Aesthetics," *minnesota review* 71 (2009): 175-76.
29. "Surface" 18.
30. Jameson, *Political* 49.
31. Best and Marcus derive their notion of text as having a purely flat surface and a depth "hidden" "behind" it, from Jameson's apparent opposition between "latent" and "manifest" meaning (e.g., *Political* 60). However, Best and Marcus ignore the ways that Jameson (like Althusser) also foregrounds the relation between these "levels" of meaning. My shift to a phenomenological (rather than structural) model of the text as an object of embodied perception — of "soft eyes" — aims to emphasize this aspect of Marxist critical thought even more strongly.
32. "Surface" 1, 11. As numerous critics have pointed out, *The Wire* itself likewise compels engagement with totality by way of immersion in detailed depictions of everyday life in a contemporary American city (Baltimore). A specific case in point: over the course of the season, the murder that Kima investigates with "soft eyes" becomes crucial to the election of a new Baltimore mayor who runs on the issue of crime — even though Kima's evidence later reveals this particular death to be accidental. As the tagline to the show puts it: "it's all connected." Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle have used Jameson's notion of cognitive mapping to discuss the relation between realism and totality in *The Wire*. See Toscano and Kinkle, "Baltimore as World and Representation: Cognitive Mapping and Capitalism in *The Wire*," *Dossier Journal* (2009), <http://dossierjournal.com/read/theory/baltimore-as-world-and-representation-cognitive-mapping-and-capitalism-in-the-wire/>. Patrick Jagoda, by contrast, prefers the notion of a "network aesthetics," which he derives from the work of Bruno Latour. See Jagoda, "Wired" 190. For Jameson's own reflections on the show, see Jameson, "Realism and Utopia in *The Wire*," *Criticism* 52:3-4 (Summer/Fall 2010): 358-72. Finally, Liam Kennedy and Stephen Shapiro point out that, while *The Wire* presents the neoliberal city as an "imagined totality," the show is also "caught up in the conditions and contradictions of its own powerful social critique." Kennedy and Shapiro, "Tales of the Neoliberal City: *The Wire's* Boundary Lines," in *The Wire: Race, Class, and Genre*, eds. Liam Kennedy and Stephen Shapiro (Ann Arbor: U Michigan P, 2012) 148-49.
33. Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (Peterborough: Broadview, 2001 [1961]) 33. This overlap is due in part to their shared investments in Marxism (see notes 26 and 28 above). Yet it is also important to note that unlike many Marxists — Althusser most famously — Williams and Merleau-Ponty both gave serious attention to what the former called "lived experience." For an analysis of Williams's concept of

experience, see Jason M. Baskin, "Romanticism, Culture, Collaboration: Raymond Williams Beyond the Avant-Garde," *Cultural Critique* (Winter 2013): 108-36.

34. "Surface" 12.
35. Raymond Williams, *Problems in Materialism and Culture* (London: Verso, 1980) 31-49.
36. In her response to Best and Marcus, Ellen Rooney shows that Althusser himself does not accede to any simple dualism. In fact, Althusser's account of reading relies on a conception of visibility and invisibility that echoes — perhaps surprisingly, given his rejection of phenomenology — Merleau-Ponty's account of the constitutive blindness and incompleteness of perception that I have focused on here. See Rooney, "Live Free" 127-30.
37. Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977) 82.
38. Williams, *Problems* 47.
39. *Problems* 49.
40. Williams, *Marxism* 170.
41. "Surface" 1-2, 19.
42. *Problems* 48.
43. "Surface" 2.
44. *Problems* 21.
45. "Surface" 17.
46. "Surface" 1.
47. In a different vein, Joe Cleary's, Jed Esty's, and Colleen Lye's recent theorization of "peripheral realisms" could be seen as just such a practical attempt to shift current reading practices such as surface reading — part of what Esty and Lye identify as the "realist turn" in contemporary criticism — toward Marxist critical concerns. See Jed Esty and Colleen Lye, "Peripheral Realisms Now," *Modern Language Quarterly* 73:3 (2012): 269-88.
48. "Surface" 18. See Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," *Critical Inquiry* 30:2 (Winter 2004): 231.
49. "Surface" 18.

## Ultimate Dialogicality

Timothy Bewes

Near the end of the astonishing first chapter of *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Mikhail Bakhtin quotes a passage from the work of his contemporary, the critic Viktor Shklovsky. It's a passage Bakhtin admires, despite reservations concerning its biographical and historical emphasis. Shklovsky's great insight, according to Bakhtin, was that even Dostoevsky's imperfections are important to his work; indeed, the failure of his works to present coherent wholes is a constituent element of his achievement:

I assume [writes Shklovsky] that Dostoevsky had too little time not because he signed too many contracts or because he himself procrastinated with his works. As long as a work remained multi-leveled and multi-voiced, as long as the people in it were still arguing, then despair over the absence of a solution would not set in. The end of a novel signified for Dostoevsky the fall of a new Tower of Babylon.<sup>1</sup>

"This is a very true observation," comments Bakhtin. However, for all its suggestiveness, he rejects Shklovsky's explanation. Dostoevsky's reluctance to finish his works, according to Shklovsky, is bound up with the complexity of his age — with, as Bakhtin paraphrases, "the conflict of historical forces and voices of the epoch — social, political, ideological...a conflict running through all stages of Dostoevsky's life and creative activity, permeating all events of his life and organizing both the form and the content of all his works."<sup>2</sup> Underpinning Shklovsky's brilliant reading of Dostoevsky is something like a standard Marxist ideology-critique, a commitment to referring formal elements to their "material conditions," and thereby to attaining a form of critical closure. If the open-endedness of Dostoevsky's works is a symptom of his epoch, that verdict is the surest way to slam them shut.

Bakhtin was hardly the first thinker to break with this tendency within the Marxist critical tradition; the second edition of *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (where this



discussion appears) was published only in 1963, long after the major contributions of, say, Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin.<sup>3</sup> For Bakhtin, the unfinished quality of Dostoevsky's works cannot be contained by the issue of contemporary political and ideological "conflict"; nor can it be solely due to issues of Dostoevsky's biography and personality; nor is it possible to extract from it any direct social, philosophical, or existential significance. What, then, is the explanation for Dostoevsky's difficult relation to completion? What, furthermore, does Bakhtin's methodological "break" amount to? What is the relation between Bakhtin's own method and the account of Dostoevsky in which it was first developed? And how is it possible, finally, to derive a critical practice from a reading that seems to insist at every moment on the impossibility of a critical reading?

The break that Bakhtin effects, within Marxism, has everything to do with the qualities that he locates in Dostoevsky's work, the implications of which, however, he refuses to enclose there. This in itself is already a distinct methodological departure: that the reading of a work should have dramatic implications for the critical approach; that the two should be so mutually entwined that it is impossible to say which precedes which. The explanation for the break, in fact, is Bakhtin's greatest critical innovation, even though he attributes it to Dostoevsky: the discovery of polyphony. For Bakhtin, polyphony (or its near-synonym, "heteroglossia") is not a formal *quality* of particular works nor even of the novel as such. Polyphony is a *propensity*, one that is immanent within the novel form; a condition towards which everything in the novel gravitates:

In Dostoevsky's polyphonic novel we are dealing not with ordinary dialogic form, that is, with an unfolding of material within the framework of its own monologic understanding and against the firm background of a unified world of objects. No, here we are dealing with an ultimate dialogicality, that is, a dialogicality of the ultimate whole....Dostoevsky's novel...is constructed not as the whole of a single consciousness, absorbing other consciousnesses as objects into itself, but as a whole formed by the interaction of several consciousnesses, none of which entirely becomes an object for the other....Everything in the novel is structured to make dialogic opposition inescapable. Not a single element of the work is structured from the point of view of a nonparticipating "third person."<sup>4</sup>

Bakhtin's notion of polyphony is not, as it has often been understood to be, a proposition about the proliferation of viewpoints, voices, or perspectives in the novel, but a proposition about the quality of the novelistic voice. Polyphony does not concern what the novel is able to represent or say, but what it is *not* able to say, what the novel is. The novel is not a form for the expression of points of view, plural or otherwise. Insofar as such expression takes place in the novel, it is as an interruption of its inherent logic.<sup>5</sup> In one of his clearest elaborations of that logic, Bakhtin writes: "[t]he

development of the novel is a function of the deepening of dialogic essence....Fewer and fewer neutral, hard elements ('rock bottom truths') remain that are not drawn into dialogue. Dialogue moves into the deepest molecular and, ultimately, subatomic levels."<sup>6</sup> Dialogue, here, has nothing to do with communication. "Dialogue" is Bakhtin's term for that quality in the novel that resists monological explanation. What Bakhtin means by the "deepening of dialogic essence" is the *internal* development of this discursive and aesthetic formation in which words will no longer designate or transmit circumscribed meanings. The effect of a novelist attempting to police or control the transmission of meaning in the work — if the work is a novel in Bakhtin's sense — will be nothing other than a further molecularization of its essence. (At the end of this essay I will briefly discuss a recent example of a work in which this cycle is apparent.)

For Bakhtin, then, the very category of the "uncompleted" work is monologic. The problem with Shklovsky's reading of Dostoevsky is not its commitment to ideology critique, but its limitation of Dostoevsky's works in the service of that critique. That limitation is accompanied, in Shklovsky, by a clear demarcation between the critic and the work. "Uncompletedness" is the verdict with which Shklovsky establishes that closure and that relation; and it presupposes the solidity of other categories: the sovereignty of the author and the identifiability of the author's intentions; the necessary conformity of a completed work with those intentions; the critic's understanding of the work as determined by such qualities of completion and closure; the work's organization by linear temporality — such that a work of literature might be said to have a point of origin and a point of termination — and by spatial integrity, such that the work remains an object of the critic's knowledge, contemplation, and (potential) understanding.

Such "rock bottom truths," existing "four-square," to adopt an image from Elizabeth Bowen — like "houses in a landscape, unrelated and positive" — are for Bakhtin inimical to the world of "multi-leveledness and contradictoriness" that the novel ushers us into.<sup>7</sup>

That world is far more than the world interior to literature or to the novel. If polyphony means anything at all, especially politically, it must extend to the practice and exercise of literary criticism, to the world in which such criticism is undertaken, and to the relation between them. When we ask theoretical or methodological questions that presuppose the activity of a critic *with respect to* a literary work, or that conceive the qualities of a particular work in "formal" terms that require translation into critical or theoretical language, we foreclose the kind of relation to the literary object that is implied in Bakhtin's fullest understanding of polyphony, according to which the work is no longer an object of knowledge, a vehicle of extrinsic meaning, but a participant in the critical dialogue.

In an introduction to the English translation of *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Wayne Booth offers a summary of these larger implications of Bakhtin's work:

[W]hat is at stake, in reading Bakhtin, is far more than the question of how we read, or even how we evaluate, fiction. The effort to transcend the author's voice in this book is not a handbook treatment of the technical means to specific artistic effects; it is rather part of a lifetime inquiry into profound questions about the entire enterprise of thinking about what human life means. How are we to know and to say anything to each other about what our lives mean, without reduction to destructive or irrelevant simplicities? When novelists imagine characters, they imagine worlds that characters inhabit, worlds that are laden with values. Whenever they reduce those multiple worlds to one, the author's, they give a false report, an essentially egotistical distortion that tells lies about the way things are. Bakhtin's ultimate value — full acknowledgment of and participation in a Great Dialogue — is thus not to be addressed as just one more piece of "literary criticism"; even less is it a study of fictional technique or form (in our usual sense of form). It is a philosophical inquiry into our limited way of mirroring — and improving — our lives.<sup>8</sup>

The concepts of monologia and polyphony explored in Bakhtin's work, then, issue a challenge to us as readers (that is to say, as critics): how to read without "monologizing" the text, or the position of the critic, or the results of the research, or the context in which, and to which, both work and critic can be said to be speaking?

The theoretical quandary opened up by Bakhtin's work, and especially by his insistence on "Dostoevsky alone" as the creator of polyphony, is whether the transformation in the organization of the literary work announced by the category of polyphony is a real historical development or merely the effect of a particular literary practice, to be subjected in its turn to critical analysis.<sup>9</sup> Are we entitled, on the basis of Bakhtin's work (or similar observations in the works of other thinkers), to embrace the full implications of the shift from monologue to dialogue and apply them in our own critical practice; or is doing so to abjure the responsibility of the critic?

This quandary has, in one form or another, divided critics within the Marxist tradition since its inception (as it does Bakhtin and Shklovsky). Theodor Adorno and Georg Lukács, perhaps, are its emblematic figures. In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno praised Samuel Beckett's works for their "obsession with a meaninglessness that has developed historically." Beckett's nothingness, says Adorno, is a "positive nothingness" and therefore "merited."<sup>10</sup> For Lukács, by contrast, such declarations help to establish Adorno, along with "a considerable part of the leading German intelligentsia," as a resident in the "Grand Hotel Abyss...a beautiful hotel, equipped with every comfort, on the edge of an abyss, of nothingness, of absurdity."<sup>11</sup> Bakhtin doesn't help to resolve this quandary, which remains, strictly speaking, undecidable; for how would it be possible to adjudicate over whether the "contradictoriness" of the world is subjective or objective? Even to ask the question is to predetermine the answer by assuming a

separation (between subject and object, critic and work) that polyphony, in Bakhtin's sense, makes radically ambiguous.

The fact is that when Bakhtin uses the words "monologize" and "monologic," it is almost always in reference to interpretations of Dostoevsky by other critics, rather than to works of literature by writers other than Dostoevsky. Polyphony is a critical practice as much as a feature of literary works; it is, in Wayne Booth's words, "an enterprise of thinking about what human life means." And yet, in notes that Bakhtin made in 1961 prior to his "reworking of the Dostoevsky book," Bakhtin himself is in no doubt that the transformations registered in his book and in Dostoevsky's writing are changes "in reality itself"; Dostoevsky is prophetic, he says, insofar as he "succeeded in revealing [them] earlier than the others."<sup>12</sup>

What are the implications of Bakhtin's study, and his discovery of polyphony, for contemporary literary criticism? We might begin by considering the critical terms that have frequently been used to make sense of certain experimental features in so-called "postmodern" and contemporary literature. For terms such as "metafiction," "double-coding," and "intertextuality," while apparently indebted to Bakhtin's theory of the novel, depart from Bakhtin when they present themselves as forms predicated on the loss or the irreducible mediation of experience — for example, as demystifying or otherwise complicating the "simpler" forms of fiction, referential meaning, and intersubjectivity. What Bakhtin teaches us is that the currents named by such terms are part of a dynamic that is inherent to the novel form itself — a dynamic that has continued through and alongside, but also despite, the historical period called the postmodern.

Take, for example, the poetic effect or textual feature known as "intertextuality." For theorists of the postmodern, including Fredric Jameson and Linda Hutcheon, intertextuality is the symptom of a crisis of meaning and of discourse, what Jameson in *Postmodernism* calls a situation of "discursive heterogeneity without a norm," that affects advanced capitalist societies. "The postliteracy of the late capitalist world," he writes, "reflects not only the absence of any great collective project but also the unavailability of the older national language itself."<sup>13</sup> As in his formulation "the waning of affect," Jameson's work on postmodernism participates in the discourse of crisis, break, and interruption.<sup>14</sup> The questions it asks concern the perceived arrival of literature and society at the limits of representation ("postliteracy"). In a similar mode, Hutcheon explains the practice of intertextuality in postmodern literary production: "A literary work can actually no longer be considered original; it if were, it could have no meaning for its reader. It is only as part of prior discourses that any text derives meaning and significance."<sup>15</sup>

But "intertextuality" is not a recent development; it originates not in the theory of postmodernity but in the work of Bakhtin. The term appears for the first time in Julia Kristeva's 1966 essay "Word, Dialogue, and Novel" as an adaptation of Bakhtin's term "heteroglossia." Something happens in the translation of heteroglossia as

intertextuality that is exemplary of the way the postmodern hypothesis came into formation primarily as a chronological one. In a passage that has been crucial for the precipitation of intertextuality as an element of a distinct postmodern poetic practice, Kristeva writes: "Any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another. The notion of intertextuality replaces that of intersubjectivity, and poetic language is read as at least double."<sup>16</sup>

There is a world of difference, however, between the idea of the text, "any text," as a "mosaic of quotations" and Bakhtin's proposition of the "multi-leveledness and contradictoriness of social reality as an objective fact of the epoch."<sup>17</sup> To transpose the insights of Bakhtin's work into the terms of a historically determined "crisis" in literary meaning, or to reconceive them as the basis of a creative practice, is to jettison its essence: the negative relation between voice and expression. In the name of such a postmodern break or "crisis," heteroglossia becomes a positive rather than negative principle, enabling figures such as the architectural theorist Charles Jencks to use "intertextuality" in a celebratory way to mean something like "eclecticism," a usage that seeped into the literary-critical discourse of the "postmodern novel."<sup>18</sup> In this way, intertextuality has functioned as a way of containing or reterritorializing the notion of polyphony, returning it to the text as a formal feature and thereby shoring up the boundary between the critic and the work.

Contrary to the theory of intertextuality, what we see in the contemporary novel is not a subjective crisis or break in the possibility of meaning but a continuation and deepening of the trajectory of "dialogism" (or heteroglossia) that, for Bakhtin, is tied to the emergence of the novel. When we interrupt this trajectory with the existential notion of the crisis in meaning — a notion that cannot help but subjectivize the question of literary form — or the proposition of a distinct school of "postmodern" poetics, or the question of what comes after the postmodern, we betray the inherent dialogism of the novel, which is inimical to all talk of schools, identities, trends, or breaks. The endpoint of this trajectory, and the fulfillment of its logic, is the disappearance of the novel from our inventory of critical objects; the disappearance, in fact, of the critical object as such.

At present, such a disappearance is only imaginable. For this reason, to name specific writers and works in which this development might be seen to play out is to risk losing a sense of the trajectory by turning dialogism into a writing practice, tied to the aesthetic of a particular period, or writer, or group of writers. For the inhospitality of the novel to monological reading is apparent in a great variety of contemporary writing, from the formally experimental works of Dennis Cooper or James Kelman, to the quasi-realist works of Ian McEwan or Alan Hollinghurst, to the autofictional narratives of Tao Lin, Amélie Nothomb, or Jean-Philippe Toussaint. To say that not a single element in the works of any of these writers is "structured from the point of view of a nonparticipating 'third person'" is no doubt an exaggeration. Nevertheless, it is insofar as they depart from, betray, or fall short of their novelistic



essence, as Bakhtin has it, that we are able to locate any paraphrasable utterance, communicable idea, or unframed predicate in their works.<sup>19</sup> That essence cannot, in principle, be located in any work or group of works, nor can it be subjectivized as, say, an artistic motif or personal ethic of a particular writer.

In one of his few remarks on Bakhtin, the writer J. M. Coetzee appears to contradict this principle. In a 1995 review of the fourth volume of Joseph Frank's biography of Dostoevsky in the *New York Review of Books*, Coetzee refers to Bakhtin's notion of dialogism, opining that, in the novels of Dostoevsky, dialogism "is a matter not of ideological position, still less of novelistic technique, but of the most radical intellectual and even spiritual courage."<sup>20</sup> Coetzee seems aware that such an interpretation is not spelled out in Bakhtin's work — but he talks of it as an omission that Frank's account of Dostoevsky's writing quietly makes good. "To the degree that Dostoevskian dialogism grows out of Dostoevsky's own moral character, out of his ideals, and out of his being as a writer, it is only distantly imitable," he writes.<sup>21</sup>

In this instance, of course, Coetzee is himself writing in the critical mode, the mode of explication. It is impossible to find such statements in Coetzee's works of fiction — even when they do in fact appear, as in *Diary of a Bad Year*, the 2007 work made up, in part, of fictional essays authored by the novel's protagonist, including a piece entitled "On Authority in Fiction," in which the narrator argues, against the famous interventions of Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault, that the authority of the author can and "must be earned."<sup>22</sup> By such conceits, framing a series of indisputably monological opinions through fictional characters, Coetzee's writing over the past decade has repeatedly seemed to want to scandalize the dialogic conditions of the novel. The effect of such gestures, of course, is precisely the opposite: to dramatize the inhospitality of the novel to monological opinion. The views put forward in a novel and the views of the novelist are radically heterogeneous, *even when they are indistinguishable*.<sup>23</sup> It is surprising, therefore, to find the case made for the author as the "ultimate determining instance" in a critical essay by a writer who (against his own most concerted efforts, perhaps) has persistently explored and extended the dialogism of the novel form in his own work.

Coetzee's 2003 novel *Elizabeth Costello* is the story of Elizabeth, a famous writer of fiction, who is periodically invited to give lectures on matters not directly related to her work — a sign, presumably, of the tendency of fiction to discard its dialogical quality in the transmission to a critical readership. In the book's opening chapter, Elizabeth's son John reflects on the predicament of fiction when it comes to the communication of ideas:

[W]hen it needs to debate ideas...realism is driven to invent situations — walks in the countryside, conversations — in which characters give voice to contending ideas and thereby in a certain sense embody them.... In such debates ideas do not and indeed cannot float free: they are tied to

the speakers by whom they are enounced, and generated from the matrix of individual interests out of which their speakers act in the world...<sup>24</sup>

The observation, of course, is a Bakhtinian one; and yet the very context of this remark is just such a “situation” — in this case, a conversation in a hotel room in Pennsylvania between a famous writer (Elizabeth Costello) and her son John, whose private reflections these may be, presented as they are in free indirect discourse.<sup>25</sup> Coetzee here turns the very incommunicability of ideas in fiction into an idea, moreover, a communicable one; but he does so precisely by means of its uncommunicability, for the idea itself provides us with the rationale according to which we are unable to take it as one. The moment is a pure reversal: the idea cannot survive its communication in the work; nor, however, can the *impossibility* of its communication survive *its* communication. The passage comes as close as possible to encapsulating the logic of the novel in an idea without thereby destroying it.

In such episodes, the contemporary novel participates in critical discourse and issues an injunction to it: to attend to the fact that the novel is becoming ever more dialogical, ever less suitable to the circulation of opinions; indeed, that the very logic of the novel may dictate its obliteration as an entity defined in merely formal or historical terms, or as the object of a critical “reading.”

## Notes

1. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 1984) 9.
2. Bakhtin, *Problems* 38.
3. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* is an extensively revised edition of Bakhtin's 1929 text *Problems of Dostoevsky's Art*. The remarks on Shklovsky's book on Dostoevsky, which was published in Moscow in 1957, obviously date from the later revision. For details of the differences between the 1929 and 1963 editions see Caryl Emerson, *The First Hundred Years of Mikhail Bakhtin* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1997) 75-93.
4. *Problems* 18.
5. This dimension of Bakhtin's notion of polyphony has often caused problems for critics tasked with explicating his ideas. Such problems are exacerbated when otherwise insightful and penetrating readers of Bakhtin have tried to locate an "ethics" in his work, a task that implies one of wresting an ethical subject out of the "unfinalizability" of polyphonic discourse (*Problems* 53). In *Social Formalism: The Novel in Theory from Henry James to the Present* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998), Dorothy J. Hale writes that in Bakhtin's critical project "the author of the 'polyphonic novel,' whose dialogic consciousness is represented through — but is still greater than — the multiplicity of his characters' voices, becomes the new Bakhtinian ideal" — this while acknowledging that Bakhtin makes it "impossible to identify the 'point' in the [Bakhtinian] subject's unique 'point of view'" (164). What we learn from Dostoevsky's works, Hale continues, is that "the best point of view is that which is plural and not singular" (174). Yet the claim that the "dialogic consciousness" of the author stands over and above the voices of his characters does not have a discernible basis in Bakhtin's work. The monologic formulation "the best point of view" interrupts the dialogicality of the novel with the unifying principle of the author. Likewise, Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan, whose recent work *Between Philosophy and Literature* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2013) rereads Bakhtin's work in light of his ethically-tinged early essays, is keen to extract an ethical quality from Bakhtin's later work. To this end, she redefines the term "loophole," which Bakhtin uses to characterize the "double-voiced" discourse of Dostoevsky's narrators and heroes, and gives it an explicitly ethical inflection deriving from its appearance in Bakhtin's essay "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity" (ca. 1920-23). Thus, the "word with a loophole," which in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* is a mode in which (say) the Underground Man retains "the possibility for altering the ultimate, final meaning of one's own words," becomes for Erdinast-Vulcan "a precondition of ethical freedom," predicated on a distinction between the author and hero, and between the "ontological" and the "phenomenological": "[t]he invisibility of the subject to itself...generates the need for the enframing gaze of the authorial other." This too is a non-Bakhtinian conclusion insofar as it depends on distinctions that do not survive the appearance of an "ultimate dialogicality" in Bakhtin's thinking (127-28, 132). Ruth Coates puts it well: "The clear implication of 'ultimate' dialogicality is the inadmissibility, in theory, of any kind of observing or controlling discourse whatsoever" (*Christianity in Bakhtin: God and the Exiled Author* [Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998] 92).
6. Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: U Texas P, 1981) 300.
7. Elizabeth Bowen, *The Last September* (New York: Anchor, 2000) 53, and *Problems* 27.
8. Wayne C. Booth, "Introduction," *Problems* xxiv-xxv.



9. *Problems* 34.
10. Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 1997) 153.
11. Georg Lukács, "Preface," *The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge: MIT P, 1971) 22.
12. Mikhail Bakhtin, "Toward a Reworking of the Dostoevsky Book" (Appendix II, *Problems*) 285.
13. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke UP, 1991) 17.
14. Jameson, *Postmodernism* 10.
15. Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1988) 126.
16. Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, and Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia UP, 1980) 66.
17. *Problems* 27.
18. See Graham Allen, *Intertextuality* (London: Routledge, 2000) 185 and following.
19. *Problems* 66, 68.
20. J. M. Coetzee, "Dostoevsky: The Miraculous Years," *Stranger Shores: Essays 1986-1999* (London: Vintage, 2002) 145.
21. Coetzee, "Dostoevsky" 145-46. I am grateful to Carrol Clarkson's book *J. M. Coetzee: Countervoices* for alerting me to this and several other references to Bakhtin in Coetzee's work. For Clarkson too, Coetzee "departs from Bakhtin" in this moment (*J. M. Coetzee: Countervoices* [Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009] 9, 105).
22. "Dostoevsky" 149.
23. In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Bakhtin addresses the question of how we should regard ideas that we may encounter in Dostoevsky's essays, letters, and diary entries — that is to say, "straightforward monologically confirmed ideas" — when they happen to coincide with ideas that we later find expressed by characters in his novels. Bakhtin answers as follows: "[i]n exactly the same way we regard the ideas of Napoleon III in *Crime and Punishment* (ideas with which Dostoevsky the thinker was in total disagreement) or the ideas of Chaadaev and Herzen in *The Adolescent* (ideas with which Dostoevsky the thinker was in partial agreement): that is, we should regard the ideas of Dostoevsky the thinker as the *idea-prototypes* for certain ideas in his novels" (92). Similarly, perhaps we should consider the idea of the "moral character" of Dostoevsky's dialogism put forward by Coetzee in the 1995 essay to be simply an "idea-prototype" for the idea of "authority in fiction" that we later find inhabiting the consciousness of the writer-protagonist in *Diary of a Bad Year*.
24. J. M. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello* (New York: Viking, 2003) 9.
25. "We must remember," writes Bakhtin, "that the image of an idea [in Dostoevsky] is inseparable from the image of a person, the carrier of that idea. It is not the idea in itself that is the 'hero of Dostoevsky's works'...but rather the *person born of that idea*" (*Problems* 85).

## Reading Life and Death

Kevin Floyd

This brief essay is about practices of reading that converge with practices of knowledge — with epistemological imperatives that require readings of the social that stabilize meaning rather than proliferate it.<sup>1</sup> But does this mean that this essay is about reductive reading? Marx reminds us that concrete social reality can never be exhausted by what he calls the concrete in thought: epistemological readings of the world are by definition abstract, incomplete, socially and historically embedded and conditioned.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, in these terms, the charge of "reductionism" tends to lose all content, insofar as it implies that there is such a thing as a knowledge of the world that doesn't consciously or unconsciously distill the reality it endeavors to grasp.

But this essay lingers on the implications of reduction, because reading's convergence with knowledge will in the present case be, quite literally, a matter of life and death — and, specifically, a matter of the extinguishing of life, of what we might call life's reduction to death. Elizabeth Povinelli proposes that specific forms of truth are immanent to specific forms of life. She considers, for example, the insistent production of truth by "so-called ultraconservative Christians," in which all possible understandings of the world will necessarily include a conflict between good and evil, the body's resurrection, and extramarital abominations of the flesh. This form of truth is a requirement for this form of life's continuous being. But it also, and inseparably, demands what we might call a queer form of death.<sup>3</sup> Or, more precisely, and to paraphrase Foucault, the fostering of the form of life Povinelli describes is inseparable from the disallowance of another form of life, a queer form of life, to the point of death.<sup>4</sup> Here I want to consider a specific queer form of life under imminent threat of death. And I want to do this in terms that are at once biopolitical and dialectical. The form of truth production Povinelli elaborates can also be understood as an epistemological form of reading. A form of life, I contend, precisely insofar as it insists on its own continuation, requires a reading of the world that stabilizes the world's legibility. In putting it this way, I try to make explicit what Povinelli leaves implicit, and indeed what the discourse of biopolitics too frequently leaves implicit,

or fails to recognize altogether: that the very reading of life in biopolitical terms raises (or begs) the question of life's own capacity to read, and indeed its reductionist capacity, its capacity to produce specific, necessarily abstract readings of the world which are also insistent forms of knowledge on which life itself can depend. The reading of life and death I perform here is also about the life-and-death stakes of reading.

Jeffrey Tucker reminds us that Samuel Delany's novel *The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals* is "the first novel-length work of fiction on AIDS from a major publisher in the United States."<sup>5</sup> Indeed the sheer dearth of scholarship on this novel is perhaps all the more striking given Delany's routine citation as an icon of queer thought. Appearing in 1984, it depicts that brief window of time between the appearance of the epidemic in New York and the official identification of the virus that catalyzes it — that brief window of time, in other words, before the situation to which names now refer was conceptually stabilized by names.

This ninth tale in Delany's *Nevèryon* cycle, a highly fragmentary and experimental one even by Delany's standards, blends two parallel narratives.<sup>6</sup> One of these is contemporary, consisting largely of anecdotes apparently drawn from Delany's journals and recounting his daily experience in the earliest days of the epidemic. Set largely in the environs of Times Square, the supporting characters include hustlers and homeless of Delany's acquaintance. The other narrative is set in the ancient land *Nevèryon* and, like the other tales in the series, takes that "paraliterary" form known as sword-and-sorcery. The most immediate, obvious parallel, however, is widespread, disoriented shock in the face of a lethal, distinctly urban contagion with multiple transmission routes, including sexual ones.

This text that focuses, as the discourse surrounding Delany's work so often insists, on socially "marginal" life, does not simply represent it, but reflexively performs from its standpoint a struggle to stabilize reading, to produce practical knowledge, to orient a radically disoriented subjectivity to a necropolitical and potentially illegible environment. This is an environment in which multiple readings of an emergent lethality vie with each other, in which epidemiological vocabularies as formal and official as they are tentative and stumbling compete with anxious rumor and speculation. Figures and concepts collide in an effort to read, as it were "from below," the broader social situation of a specific, "promiscuous" urban network of immediately threatened life.

Late in the narrative, Delany recounts the evening he saw an announcement on the television news that researchers might finally have isolated the virus that causes AIDS.<sup>7</sup> But before this late, climactic moment, experiencing the epidemic means experiencing "dis-ease before anything that might bear 'disease' as its proper designation."<sup>8</sup> A hustler friend named Joey asks Delany a question he can't answer: "your body just stops healing, and even an infection from a little cut, or a cold, can kill you..."<sup>9</sup> Another acquaintance, a night-shift nurse in an emergency room, is struck

by the contrast between what the newspapers represent as a relative infrequency of cases, and what she actually witnesses at work. And a friend named Ted reports his response to the words he finds scrawled in red paint on the wall of a public men's room, "AIDS patients cruise here":

[T]hat one...just made me crazy!...It could have been someone who knew something and was trying to warn people. Or it could have been somebody who just wanted to stop the cruising. Or it could have been somebody who didn't get what he wanted there sexually and was just bitching. But any way you read it, I didn't want to be there.<sup>10</sup>

Everyone tries to read the signs; everyone has anecdotal evidence. But evidence of what? It's not at all clear what these anecdotes might ultimately signify.

Reading that proliferates meaning also produces, in this case, a truly frightening social incoherence. Delany reminds us of Susan Sontag's insistence that "diseases should not become social metaphors."<sup>11</sup> But he responds that, in this case, the stabilizations provided by metaphor are inevitable: "AIDS is the sparkplug in a social machine of which we are all...a part."<sup>12</sup> Extending the machine metaphor from the social totality to the corporeal body, he adds that the stark "malfunctioning" of the immune system is moreover a deadly opening of the body to its outside. AIDS, he reminds us, refers not to a disease, but to "a mysterious and microbically unagented *failure to fight disease*": the body becomes dis-unified, ceases to be "whole."<sup>13</sup> It opens itself, we might say, to an outside that is both social and epistemological; it throws into question its own relation to, its distinction from, that outside. "This is the aspect of the 'illness' that is ravenous for metaphors to stifle its unsettled shift, its insistent uneasiness, its conceptual turbulence."<sup>14</sup>

On one hand, then, *Plagues and Carnivals* captures a life-and-death demand for a de-proliferation of meaning, for resolution in the face of this "epidemic of signification," for a nameable "microbic agent." But paradoxically and crucially, it insists at the same time that destabilizing these figures and concepts is most important "in the long run" — refusing to reify the condition in terms of statistical "risk factors," for instance — precisely in order to maintain at least the possibility that it can be grasped, however inadequately, within some broader set of social relations.<sup>15</sup> The chaotic, immediately experienced incomprehension this text foregrounds, an illegibility which is also a multilegibility, imposes a different kind of orientation to the outside, opens up necessary questions about the broader social processes within which reading takes place. Any possibility of locating the condition's larger parameters and determinations, we are told, emerges precisely from this absence of conceptual stillness. The text performs both an insistence on the gap between the name and its referent, and a palpable anxiety about this gap.

I want now to move briefly away from this novel in order to return to it. I want

to explicate further the complex epistemological practice of reading it stages, but I also want to suggest the way in which the situation it reads remains our own — as Jean Comaroff suggests in an essay that internationalizes, we might say, a similar set of questions.<sup>16</sup> Comaroff critiques what she identifies as certain tendencies that characterize the frequent reading of the southern African AIDS sufferer in biopolitical and/or necropolitical terms — as exemplifying “bare life,” for example, or as instantiating what Foucault would understand as those contemporary populations allowed to die. Comaroff proposes that such readings often fail to recognize the reading capacities of the sufferers themselves, capacities not unlike those staged by Delany’s novel. She stresses that “life itself” is not only the “medium” in which biopower is exercised, but also “the stuff of collective action and aspiration,” including a collective critique of “the monopoly over the essence of vitality,...patents and intellectual property rights,...the bald rhetoric that equates life and profit.”<sup>17</sup> In the face of “life imbued with ordinary, future-oriented expectations,” she adds, the reading of these populations as bare life actually threatens to reinscribe what contemporary postcolonial or neocolonial regimes themselves already tend to do: reduce active, thinking, cognitive subjects to “naked biological being.”<sup>18</sup>

She further identifies a southern African AIDS “counterpolitics” that remains “convinced that there is a discernible logic to power relations, one that impacts directly on...immediate worlds.” And as she points out, “disambiguating those relations...is the primary work of such counterpolitics.... AIDS organizers have sought to build a coherent, critical social etiology,... to forge a narrative of agents and effects, of calculating statesmen and captains of global industry, who personify control over the means of life and death” — “albeit at the risk,” she adds, “of strategic reductionism.”<sup>19</sup> “Disambiguating relations,” “forging narratives,” “strategic reductionism”: like Delany, Comaroff underscores both the political indispensability and the necessary limits of efforts to analyze and stabilize — to reductively read — the global power relations that operate in relation to the pandemic.

Such an effort serves also as a defense against a rather different, more immediately necropolitical kind of reductionism. In the parallel, sword-and-sorcery narrative we find in *Plagues and Carnivals*, other kinds of reactions to the epidemic also turn on life-and-death practices of reading. On crowded urban streets, a voice rises above the din: “Get away! I don’t want your lousy diseases! I don’t want one of you gettin’ anywhere near me.”<sup>20</sup> A small group of the not-yet-infected decides to confront the contagion by gathering in secret to participate in a ritual appeal to what the text identifies as the god of “edges, borders, and boundaries.”<sup>21</sup> One of the participants in this ritual notes that he “cannot shake off this sense of contamination.”<sup>22</sup> To paraphrase Leo Bersani’s still-indispensable analysis of the early AIDS epidemic, those who are killed are read as killers: one form of life reads another form of life as a form of death.<sup>23</sup> To read those who are killed as killers is indeed to insist on death as one of the conditions of one’s own continued existence.

But I would go further and propose that such a reading would also have to be characterized as utopian, counterintuitive as that may initially sound. I take my cue from two influential, strikingly convergent readings of Ursula Le Guin. In his well-known essay on Le Guin's "ambiguous utopia" *The Dispossessed*, Delany suggests that homosexuality is among the constitutive exclusions of the world it depicts.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, Fredric Jameson's essay "World Reduction in Le Guin" — presumably the basis of the rich, suggestive Le Guin/Delany dialectic of utopian closure he would later elaborate in *Archaeologies of the Future* — reads the landscape depicted in *The Left Hand of Darkness* in terms of an exclusion of the frenzy of sensory experience frequently associated with urban environments, environments like the one we encounter in *Plagues and Carnivals*. Le Guin's novel enacts "a fantasy realization of some virtually total disengagement of the body from its surrounding environment or eco-system," and a disengagement especially from the psychic upheavals of what he calls a "permanently scandalous" sexual desire — a disengagement, an excision which is also a kind of relief, the condition for the very utopian form of life the novel depicts. Le Guin's work generally, Jameson maintains, presents us with a utopianism not of wealth but of scarcity, in which one is "liberated" especially from the disturbing sexual opportunities and complications opened up by urban capitalism. Le Guin's utopian commitment is to the country, to the village, "to agriculture and small face-to-face groups."<sup>25</sup>

*Plagues and Carnivals*, meanwhile, is one of the early texts to register the way in which AIDS is read as a "metaphor for the license, corruption, and decay that is the general urban condition."<sup>26</sup> And indeed, the extinguishment of a queer form of life begins in this novel to seem inseparable from the extinguishment of the urban as such: a genocidal insistence that is also the insistence of a form of life on its own continuation. *Plagues and Carnivals*, in other words, stages not one epistemological reading of the world, but two. And this second reading entails the form of reduction or elimination I would call, following Delany's and Jameson's convergent readings of Le Guin, utopian. It wants to extinguish an erotic saturation it insists is also a plague. It wants to eliminate an urban infrastructure it insists is also a sexually lethal infrastructure. Unlike, say, Delany's *Trouble on Triton* (which is explicitly and famously a response to *The Dispossessed*), *Plagues and Carnivals* offers not a "heterotopian" alternative to this particular kind of utopian closure, this fantasy of world reduction, but a critical staging of it.

I have suggested that Delany's novel grapples with questions that remain our own. So I will begin to move toward a conclusion by drawing attention to Jameson's more recent claim that the village ethos Le Guin's work exemplifies has become obsolete: village existence, he maintains, has by this point in capital's history "simply [been] destroyed, leaving rubble and ruin behind it."<sup>27</sup> But isn't a desexualizing world reduction precisely what is enacted by the contemporary transformation of the city *into* the village — which is to say, into the mere suburbs? Perhaps the village is



indeed destroyed; or perhaps it threatens to subsume its metropolitan opposite. A key example of the latter certainly remains, even now, the family-friendly, real-estate-friendly, finance-friendly cleansing of Times Square roughly a decade after Delany's novel first appeared, a spectacular instance of world reduction that Delany's *Times Square Red*, *Times Square Blue* has helped us understand.<sup>28</sup>

So a utopian form of life that necessitates a form of death, and from which *Plagues and Carnivals* recoils, proceeds apace: the village's moralizing, desexualizing dimensions are from this vantage quite comfortably aligned with the contemporary operations of capital. But the suggestion I have just made that contemporary finance is at once bio- and necro-political (recall Comaroff's reference to "calculating statesmen and captains of global industry") raises the question of another practice of destabilizing reading, of multilegibility: the dialectic. The contemporary socialization of "risk," for example, is clearly a matter of life and death. Randy Martin contrasts populations "at risk," populations involuntarily subjected to risk, with those good neoliberal subjects, those entrepreneurial citizens who are "capable of embracing risk" — "managers" (not "masters," he points out) "of their own lives." If risk has clearly become a key contemporary source of global profit — profit from ever-multiplying exacerbations of risk, and profit from ever-multiplying ways of hedging it — then these forms of risk are ultimately, in one way or another, "borne by bodies."<sup>29</sup> So the risks "borne" by the body of the southern African AIDS sufferer, for example, would include the national scale of debt repayment that eats away at funds for HIV/AIDS treatment as well as health care generally. Indeed Martin proposes that the form of bio-necro-political governance that has most brutally extended the logic of older, colonial governance is precisely that form of governance we call debt.

And what, then, of those responsible, obedient subjects who embrace risk? If remaking the naked city into the family-friendly village sits nicely with that utopian wager we call real estate speculation, we can also say that the insistent elimination of practices of urban promiscuity is smoothly extended into the present by the now all-but-intractable, suburban common sense that affirms that the only thing good gay subjects, responsible "managers" of their own lives, could ever want is marriage: to behave like adults at long last, to leave behind certain immature, lethal practices that famously characterized gay urban life in the Seventies. And if gay marriage is many things, one of those things is real estate speculation: the utopia of a perfectly moral form of life on the condition that it also be a safe, secure, "gated" form of life, that it pray to the gods of "edges, borders, and boundaries," that it maintain an adequate appreciation of its conditions, including gentrification and security guards.

But the multilegibility opened up by the dialectic tends to remain in motion, stereotypes notwithstanding. As soon as we can read both life and death in terms of a shared logic of financial risk, for example, disorienting inversions begin to appear:

Only when the process that begins with the metamorphosis of labor-power into a commodity has permeated men through and through and objectified each of their impulses as formally commensurable variations of the exchange relationship, is it possible for life to reproduce itself under the prevailing relations of production. Its consummate organization demands the coordination of people that are dead. The will to live finds itself dependent on the denial of the will to live: self-preservation annuls all life in subjectivity.<sup>30</sup>

The good gay subject of marriage aspires to self-preservation, operating according to a temporal logic no less committed than Goldman Sachs to the future appreciation of the assets that define it. This subject secures its distance from a horizon of life it would reduce to “bare life,” life scattered as if by centrifugal force, locked out, locked up, and yes, if necessary, disallowed to the point of death. But destabilizing readings, those readings that open up the possibility of what I have called a different orientation to the outside, may well be, as Delany insists, more important “in the long run.” Should we read these entrepreneurial gay subjects, these “formally commensurable variations of the exchange relationship,” as instances of a form of life that *externalizes* death? If the subject of self-preservation can instantiate something called *life*, then what Comaroff calls “the bald rhetoric that equates life and profit” is also a reading of the world characteristic of that form of life. Though one has to be careful about suggesting that a thinker like Adorno puts an insufficiently fine point on it, to call this form of life “damaged” doesn’t quite capture what his reading of life and death comes much closer to capturing. Life that is itself already capital? Life that is itself, somehow, also dead labor? Dead labor catachrestically vitalized via “accumulated claims, legal titles, to future production”: call it fictitious life.<sup>31</sup>

## Notes

1. A longer, differently framed version of this essay appears in *Literary Materialisms*, eds. Emilio Sauri and Mathias Nilges (New York: Palgrave, 2013).
2. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (New York: Penguin, 1993) 100-102.
3. Elizabeth A. Povinelli, “On Suicide, and Other Forms of Social Extinguishment,” *Theory Aside*, eds. Jason Potts and Daniel Stout (Durham: Duke UP, 2014) 87.
4. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage, 1990) 138.
5. Jeffrey Allan Tucker, *A Sense of Wonder: Samuel R. Delany, Race, Identity, and Difference* (Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 2004) 233.
6. Originally published by Bantam; currently available as “The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals, or: Some Informal Remarks Towards the Modular Calculus, Part Five,” Samuel R. Delany, *Flight from Nevèrÿon* (Hanover: Wesleyan UP, 1994).
7. Delany, “Plagues” 345-46.



8. "Plagues" 185.
9. "Plagues" 187.
10. "Plagues" 267.
11. "Plagues" 184.
12. "Plagues" 187.
13. "Plagues" 186; italics in original.
14. *ibid.*
15. "Plagues" 187.
16. Jean Comaroff, "Beyond Bare Life: AIDS, (Bio)Politics, and the Neoliberal Order," *Public Culture* 19:1 (2007): 197-215.
17. Comaroff, "Beyond" 211, 213-14.
18. "Beyond" 215.
19. "Beyond" 211.
20. "Plagues" 251.
21. "Plagues" 332.
22. "Plagues" 266.
23. Leo Bersani, *Is the Rectum a Grave? and Other Essays* (Chicago: U Chicago P, 2010) 17.
24. Samuel R. Delany, "To Read *The Dispossessed*," *The Jewel-Hinged Jaw*, (Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 2009) 105-65.
25. Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future* (London: Verso, 2005) 269, 274, 159.
26. "Plagues" 188.
27. Fredric Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 200) 578.
28. Samuel R. Delany, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (New York: New York UP, 1999).
29. Randy Martin, "From the Race War to the War on Terror," *Beyond Biopolitics: Essays on the Governance of Life and Death*, eds. Patricia Clough and Craig Willse (Durham: Duke UP, 2011) 258.
30. Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E.F.N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 1974) 229.
31. Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. III, trans. David Fernbach (New York: Penguin, 1991) 599.

## 29 | 73 | 08: Poetry, Crisis, and a Hermeneutic of Limits

Ruth Jennison

Our current crisis, whose *phenomenal* inauguration began in 2008, and whose ending our rulers continue to proclaim with reference to the metrics of their stock market, continues to structure and transform the critical practices of Marxists and non-Marxists alike.<sup>1</sup> In what follows, I want to chart two waypoints in a historical terrain opened up by the global capitalist crisis and a marked upswing in anti-capitalist and anti-police struggles. In response to these changing historical conditions, we find a corollary set of shifts and foreclosures in an American humanities critical culture that is increasingly polarized between those whose methods confront the assaults on the very existence of remunerated cultural critique, and those whose methods respond just as sensitively to the aggressions of austerity, but turn instead to micro-ontologies, "new materialisms," and neoformalisms. A series of exciting questions has come to our attention: how has the current conjuncture fundamentally transformed the kinds of Marxist critical practice that are possible? What are the opportunities of vision and hermeneutic opened up by our experience of the first deep crisis that unfurled after the definitive end of the hemispheric antinomies structured by the Cold War? Which categories of criticism continue to offer their powers of illumination, and which seem wanting, stale, or too structured by textual forms and political regimes that may be descendent, or eliminated altogether? Do Adornian pessimisms, Lukácsian narratologies, Althusserian allergies to determinative assertions, the fetish as a primary interpretive tool, and reification as dominant pathology continue to offer the critical force they once did? What kind of texts might furnish a pane upon which the breath of new critical practices might frost? My contribution to a regroupment of forces and a renovation of vision in this short essay is to suggest a methodology at once historical and formal: (1) that we examine the texts of crisis in a comparative hermeneutic, such that the older contradictions of capital illuminate those that appear to be novel to our current moment; and (2) to discover in our comparisons the intersections of various limits to capital, which are encoded for our analysis in the limits to poetic form.

My concerns here are literary, and my examples drawn from twentieth-century American poetics. This means that my objects of study are not the traditional sites of Marxist inquiry, at least in this century and most of the last, and, as such, I hope, tunnel us out of a critical sediment comprising a seemingly infinite history of revisions of one concept: narrative. In this essay I seek to extend the project of developing Marxian reading strategies for poetic form in particular. This poetic turn is in part a response to what our current crisis has revealed: the invisible temporalities of circulation must be mapped upon, alongside, over, and under, the visible geographies of uneven development, lest they calcify into the basis for another announcement of a “new” capitalism, subjected not to critique, but to the narrative renovation of its dominant contradictions. As Joshua Clover has explained:

As real accumulation ebbed after Brenner’s “Long Boom” of 1948-73, competition for extant profits intensified....This intensification can be seen in the offshoring of labor and the tax revolts that inaugurated neoliberalism, in capital’s leap into finance in search of profit, and in the need for manufacturing firms to turn over their stock more swiftly — to conform to what Harvey names “socially necessary turnover time” (*Limits* 186). Accelerated turnover demands more credit-based liquidity while at the same time expelling labor from production in favor of what we might call process servers: the “techno-telemedia apparatuses” and the administrators of an ever-more-complex-and-hurried command-and-control network, in turn subtended by information-technology and knowledge workers coordinating an increasingly global and futural economic order. Thus, the rise in finance is correlated with the rise of both speculative value and immaterial labor — but this indicates a problem in production, not a new source or mode. Finance is neither cause nor solution for this problem but its veil.<sup>2</sup>

“Hurried,” “swift,” “accelerated”: such characterizations of the temporalities of financialization proliferate. But our crisis has proven that it is not, ultimately, possible “to annihilate space by time.”<sup>3</sup> To the extent that the textual geographies of non-narrative poetic form temporalize space, and spatialize temporality, they are the historically adequate mediations of the combined and uneven spatial simultaneities in what appear as the homogenous landscapes of capitalism, just as much as they are mediations of the temporal lags, disbandings, speed shifts, and clogs in what appears to be frictionless, endless turnover. For this reason, poetics is *the form of the crisis*, providing us with entry points into the value form, and into the ontology of capitalist disaster.<sup>4</sup> The broadest query of this hermeneutic is, how does twentieth- and twenty-first-century poetry strive to represent the unrepresentable, if the unrepresentable is, by definition, the global capitalist totality in which we live and from which we are

hived off? On the level of praxis, we might ask: how does poetry offer ways for its readers to grasp the contours of the global economy? Since a crucial force of poetry resides in the figural and the unseen — metaphors, similes, line breaks, vast and micro fields of white space, allusions — it is quite possibly uniquely suited to represent a world financial system that is increasingly conducted in an invisible manner, through derivatives, currency trading, outsourcing, collateralized debt obligations, and so on. American poetry itself has shifted its formal strategies in concert with changes in our economic lives, from Depression-era parataxis to the antilyrical material signifiers that emerged within and against the rise of late capitalism.

### Waypoint 1

Comparative Crises: The comparison, better even triangulation, of the three major crises of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries ('29, '73, '08) trains a critical aperture on textual prolepsis, where form anticipates limits to capital or revolutionary possibilities as yet unpeeled by history. It also opens up the retroactive illuminations afforded by the textual artifacts of more aged crises, lays bare prehistories, and inoculates against habitual, myopic pronouncements regarding the “newness” of our own moment.

I will begin by saying that embedded in this methodology is a call for the transformation of the manner and ways that Marxism produces knowledge about our present world and its historical antecedents. In the available institutional memory, Marxist cultural theory and literary criticism has practiced ideology critique, with special attention to the contraction of vision produced by reification, the fetish, and the pernicious effects of the culture industry. To turn to the crises, and radical responses to the crises, of the 1930s, of the 1970s, and of our present, is to expand our critical work beyond pointing up contradiction, into frontiers where we might trace the conjunctures that have stenciled what Jodi Dean has called “the communist horizon.”<sup>5</sup> Revolutions and revolts around the globe have adopted the myriad forms of the Bolivarian process, the occupation (carried out in a range of forms), the unification of the factory and the square glimpsed in Egypt, barricades erected against the austerity imposed by their class, direct action shutdowns of the major arteries of capital, highways, rail, and subways, under the flag of resistance to the murderous rule of a racist police state. These indicators of widespread non-consent mandate a turn from dour Marxism and toward a vigorously historical utopianism. To compare crises is to find continuities not only in the limits at which that capital constantly claws back; it is also to find continuities of communist practice, to find out how Flint '36/'37 is, and is not, AIM's '69 occupation of Alcatraz which is, and is not, the Oakland Commune and West Coast Port shutdowns of '11. Triangulating our crisis with its 1930s' and 1970s' antecedent forms is part of renewing the visibility of the communist horizon, and part of understanding our own crisis as both historically specific and singular, but also a punctual moment in an ongoing process of immiseration and radicalization.

Part of renewing this visibility of the communist horizon is of course a matter of recovering and constructing our own archive of literature that militates against the system giving rise to crisis. For its part, anticommunism continuously constructs, clips, redeploys, and refashions the historical record of the politics, causes, and aesthetics of the crisis. The literary record confirms this. The corpse of modernism has been raised and reanimated at various moments of capitalist crisis. The ideology of American poetic modernism was first concretized by the Southern Agrarian poets who had migrated to northern institutions; poets like John Crowe Ransom and Allen Tate would brand their modernism in the embers of confederate nostalgia and anti-New Dealerdom. The tectonics of uneven development produced a conjuncture in which these American literary ideologues protected vibrantly historical works, like *The Wasteland*, from history in an alembic of formal integrity. By mid-century, the New Criticism (whose primary authors were the Agrarians) produced a modernism that excluded from the historical record whole trajectories of communist, anarchist, socialist, Black nationalist, and internationalist and utopian poetic interventions.

The first strains of renewed economic contraction after the post-war boom saw the opening of the poetic archive to discover precisely what had been excluded. Riding the crest of the next great capitalist crisis of the twentieth century after the long 1930s, the Language Poets had to produce their prehistory in those radical Zukofskian and Steinian modernisms that had been confined from view. In general, there was a re-tethering of poetry to resistance: Hannah Weiner and the American Indian Movement; Amiri Baraka and Beat disaffection from the rationalization of the labor process; again, Amiri Baraka and Black Power; Antler and rank and file machine sabotage; and on and on. These new constellations are, I want to argue, at once reconfigurations and remediations — continuities — of the older, First Crisis alliances between the avant-garde and revolutionary movements, alliances the ideology of modernism can no longer obscure.

We find ourselves in this, the third major crisis in the functioning of capital, and as this waypoint suggests, the modernist conjuncture provides an absolutely necessary prehistory to our current moment of global capitalist crisis. Our return to these preceding moments might best be conducted as part of what I am calling a methodology of “comparative crises,” in which cultural critique at minimum triangulates its proliferation of genuine critical energies devoted tracing the roots of our moment to the onset of the rise of neoliberalism of the 1970s. This critical work productively searches for, and finds, embryonic traces of our neoliberal past in both incipient austerity aggressions and resistances thereto. Examples of this critical turn to the 1970s include: *Théorie Communiste*’s renewal of communization theory and libertarian Marxism; a renaissance of interest in autonomist feminist accounts of affective labor, such as those of Sylvia Federici and Mariarosa Dalla Costa; labor histories of American wildcat strikes (see Brenner’s, Brenner’s, and Winslow’s *Rebel Rank and File*) and the political and cultural economies of the 1970s in general (Judith

Stein's *Pivotal Decade*; Jefferson Cowie's *Staying Alive*); the popularity of Badiouian and Anarcho-communisms, with their roots in the diverse sands of Maoism, in '68, ecstatic workerism, and sponteneitist comportments. David Harvey's 1982 *Limits to Capital* has found a new generation of readers under its reissuing.

When we triangulate our prehistories, reaching back through and behind the 1970s to the 1930s modernist moment, which, as Jameson argues, has always been with us, we resist the historical narrative that periodizes us at one with the 1970s, only by instantiating a break from the 1930s. Such a break certainly costs us more than a continuity of struggle. It also produces a narrative that simultaneously aligns our crisis with the rise of austerity and financialization, while unyoking us from features of crisis that were more prominent in the 1930s, ones which we certainly share now: unemployment, overproduction, the poisonous rise of investment in fixed capital and thusly in the organic composition of capital. What if, instead, each crisis offered, as Harvey would have it, a new "window" on the limits to capital, windows which our comparisons keep continuously ajar? As Harvey writes:

Marx sees each relation as a separate "window" from which we can look at the inner structure of capitalism. The view from any one window is flat and lacks perspective. When we move to another window we can see things that were formerly hidden from view. Armed with that knowledge, we can reinterpret and reconstitute our understanding of what we saw through the first window, giving it greater depth and perspective. By moving from window to window and carefully recording what we see, we come closer and closer to understanding capitalist society and all of its inherent contradictions.<sup>6</sup>

Of course, Harvey's windows exist synchronically, allowing the value relation to be viewed from multiple perspectives: the commodity form, production, consumption. Crisis comparison invests these perspectives with a diachronic, historical dimension, wherein each crisis cracks open a transom, illuminating a door through which we might see to the future and the past. But the diachronic, it turns out, always, dialectically, returns us to the landscape of the present. Here, new contradictions do not replace old ones, but are sedimented atop them, or spatially bestride them.

For example: In what follows I want to argue that the halting failures of the M-C-M' double-transaction, which always clog up the routes of global financialization, are a reshifted mediation of (1) the contest between labor and capital, and of (2) the territorialization of all space by the needs of capital, both being, of course, the signature visible oppositions of the 1930s. Let me briefly say how this might work in the example of Larry Eigner's poetry. Eigner's work (whose hard-won composition, given his lifelong non-ambulatory condition, is a subject for more expansive inquiry elsewhere) stitches together two moments in the evolution of a "materialist poetics"

(at least according to their self-understandings): Black Mountain and Language.<sup>7</sup> That is to say that his work, closely associated with both schools, sublates 1.) Black Mountain's pre-late capital, pre-Vietnam, fantasy of a textual "open field" in which a unified breath of the speaking/writing/aspirating body found its exact perceptual corollary in the type space of the page, effectively incinerating mediations of ideology and history, and 2.) Language Poetry's insistence on the immediate materiality of the signifier of the word itself. Language Poetry, then, was born in flight from the perceptible and terrifying finality of full subsumption, and indexed a valiant denial of language as a brutal mediation of other systems and darker orders. Eigner's signature windowscapes permit no such flight from history and its mediations; they display a curatorial, selective fidelity to the geographical particulars the poet surveys. This from his 1977 collection "The World and Its Streets, Places":

his life  
     the  
     open window

        where the clock sounds fade

        what is it?  
             branches out there

can you  
     stop  
     the war

                crickets      stars

                no birds      the more air  
                 sing      in the leaves

Get up and  
 speak

        something   whatever it is

                        wilds   around  
         now   now ...<sup>8</sup>

Three central themes convene in these opening lines: political will; the nonsubmission of nature to the value form; the unrepresentability of "whatever it is" that might



compose a reforested and repopulated commons whose “wilds” mark what lies on the other side of spatial limits to capital. The measured time that scores rhythms of accumulation and labor disappears (“clock sounds fade”), and in doing so, opens up an unsettled, inquisitive relationship to the “out there” that lies beyond the walls of domestic privacy. The outsideness of “out there” depends upon the voiceless phoneme “th” that differentiates “there” from “here,” and indeed the problem of our silence (“can you/ stop/ the war”; “Get up/ and speak”) delivers a pathetic fallacy in which trees, and not us, “branch out there.”

The geographic particulars (“crickets,” “stars,” “air,” “birds,” “leaves”) weigh against one another on both sides of a scale composed of empty typespace, and in this fantastical scale, “no” and “more” are quite impossibly equivalent. This is precisely what regimes of exchange and fictions of supply/demand fungibility cannot confess: that within the value form lies the possibility for a series of surpluses, thefts, devaluations, and accretions that split wages, prices, and labor time phenomenally asunder. The poem’s antilogical scales, constructed of the dynamic between space and type, between the excess (more air!) and the absence and/or silence (“no birds” are the numerator, impossibly less than the denominator of their “sing”ing) of nature, weigh the secret inequalities that reside within the dashes of M-C-M'. The current renaissance of value form theory and the return of the question of the commons and the natural surfeit therein — theoretical returns only really possible after the historical convergence of capitalist crisis and the Left’s regroupment after the failures of Stalinism and social democratic reformism — affords this window onto Eigner’s “window.” But even this window is only widened when we construct an analytic triangle of crises: our moment, Eigner’s own simultaneously crisis-contoured and countercultural 1970s, and the modernist moment. Because Eigner is also working, most acutely, at the contact point of a recognizably modernist, older tension: the production of an ever-more differentiated and uneven capitalist space which will tirelessly produce nature as the opposite of us, a space which Lefebvre reminds us, began with the surrealists, who, like Eigner, would transcode the interior life of the subject of capital, its freedoms and its unfreedoms, onto increasingly autonomous topographies of natural space; and streetspace; and private space.<sup>9</sup>

## Waypoint 2

Capitalism is not a topic. The representation of capital itself is, of course, impossible; its sheer size and abstraction could never concretize fully in a text. However, poetry encodes in its forms and contents a vast array of “limits to capital.” The detection of the limit is a form of criticism responsible to the experience and fact of permanently recurring crises. The limit is the dialectical complement to the traditional task of totalizing; it locates a failure of capital to valorize just as it locates a place for physical and critical occupations.

As Harvey has lushly explicated, these limits include: spatial and temporal barriers to the valorization of capital and, in that, the reproduction of the value form; circulatory blockages of all manners, from state intervention to the contracted consumption of immiserated workers, employed and unemployed; class struggle against the wage form and against life at the machine and the screen; overproduction and the temptations and hazards of total vertical integration, etc., etc.<sup>10</sup>

Capital can only ever be approached by texts askance, in partial ways that result in marvelous failures that give rise to the contradictions that propel the text into halting semiotic coherences. The new neo-empiricisms (object oriented ontologies, affect theory whose form of appearance as a study of feeling distracts us from its positing of the body as an empirical fleshly text that immediates systems, thing theory, animalisms, and the like) are more and more finding poetics a site of inquiry (e.g., Lauren Berlant's John Ashbery in *Cruel Optimism* or Bill Brown's W.C. Williams in *A Sense of Things* or Timothy Morton's Percy Shelley in "An Object-Oriented Defense of Poetry").<sup>11</sup> These, and many other new empiricisms, will continue to arise, compensatory salves for the temporary expulsion of Marxism from the university and from social life. However, even the neo-empiricisms seem to sense that totality is unrepresentable. An example, whose lightness the reader will indulge: the call for papers for a recent Modernist Studies Association offers evidence of a fetishistic and encyclopedic relation to the content of the quotidian, as it identifies "topics of growing significance in modernist studies," wherein "the everyday and the event might be considered separately or together to include, for example, domesticity, objects, food, fashion, waste, public engagement, responses to events of local, national, and international significance, the traumatic event and modernism as itself a happening."<sup>12</sup> This sheer proliferation of possible object-oriented entry points is a symptom of anxiety about that totality, mistaken here as so many lifeworlds of so many things, towards which modernism itself strove asymptotically.

Not all recent interventions in poetics foreclose the subject of capitalism itself: for example, for surface readers, capitalism is available content, and the work of the post identity-politics critic, with a healthy allergy to substitutionism, is to curate texts in such a way that casts light on their arrangements in a system pointing to capital. Surface reading emerges, then, as a negation of academic "activism" but it lands not far from where the critique was launched: a liberal-democratic faith in the always-already radicalized nature of both the oppressed and the text (one is reminded of Spivak's critique of Deleuze's workerism and his attendant blindness to the problem of ideology in "Can the Subaltern Speak?").<sup>13</sup> This critical comportment offers no re-entry point for criticism into social life; and its unannounced points of departure are 1.) the rejection of mediation in toto and 2.) the eradication of the organic intellectual in the American academy. For all the neo-empiricisms, capitalism is a permanent atmosphere. It may be characterized by permanent crises, but it is not a transcendable horizon, despite the production of vast numbers of subjects who see right through it.

By some contrast, I want to suggest a reading practice that reads below the surface: less to find a symptom than to chart the sedimentations of the three major periods of twentieth- and twenty-first-century capitalist crisis. To read those sedimented inscriptions through epiphenomenal topics is to miss the opportunity to see the ways in which older texts are opened up by those of our moment, and vice versa. Each crisis rises out of, and lays bare, new limits, and wrenches open new forms of consciousness. Here we revisit a text from their Depression from the perspective of our Depression, in an effort to interilluminate two crisis-consciousnesses. Muriel Rukeyser's 1938 long poem chronicling the Hawk's Nest Tunnel Disaster, which led to the death of over 700 workers, disproportionately African American, *The Book of the Dead*, offers multiple windows to the limits to capital. These include: nature, which demanded the diversion of a river; the lungs of the workers, which collapsed at the limit of extraction of relative surplus value; the costs required by capital to build the predicative fixed capital required for even larger industrial projects; the ruinous shortsightedness produced by the capitalists' discovery of the unexpected superprofits from silica. The poem delivers a dizzying range of formal strategies, the proliferation of which signifies the structurally unrepresentable fact of a totality and of a crisis in that totality: testimony; quasi-pastoral portraits; reportage; paratactical high modernism; Dickinsonian type-silences; etc. Each strategy boils over then runs out of steam before moving on to another, and the limits of form mark the limits of capital.

Rukeyser's poem addresses the sub- and invisible: the interior of the lung, the interior of the extractive tunnel. This should matter to us now because it gives us pause as we receive neoliberal narratives about financialization's novel invisible immaterialities. When we open the window of the 1930s on the window of the present, we find that the invisibility of the current crisis isn't novel but rather a *mutating remediation*, at the level of circulation, of Hawk's Nest's older invisibilities: absolute and relative surplus value extraction; accumulation through dispossession; lending regimes rooted in racism.

## Conclusion

In this short piece, I have suggested that poetic form provides a historically apt textual mediation of the rapidly proliferating limits to capital. While each poem responds to its ambient catastrophe, it is also marbled by older failures of capitalism to thrive and illuminated by future ones. It is not surprising that mediation should return as an object of debate at a time in which the failures of capitalism appear immanent, obvious; and at a time in which the humanities have undergone sustained attack, only to respond, for many new materialisms, to the imagined disciplinary authority of the harder sciences. However, there can be no theory of transition without one of mediation, and when the forms of the imagination burst forth carrying with them the crises past, present, and future all at once, we find ourselves needing to confront the question of both.

### Notes

1. Much gratitude to my comrades Joshua Clover and Jordana Rosenberg for their generous help in the development and execution of this essay.
2. Joshua Clover, "Value | Crisis | Theory," *PMLA* 127:1 (January 2012): 112.
3. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (London: Penguin, 1973) 524.
4. For an excellent elaboration of poetry as the privileged index of the ur-failure of capitalist crisis: the incomplete conversion of space into time and vice versa, see Joshua Clover, "Autumn of the System: Poetry and Financial Capital," *Journal of Narrative Theory* 40:1 (Spring 2011): 34-52.
5. Jodi Dean, *The Communist Horizon* (London: Verso, 2012).
6. David Harvey, *Limits to Capital* (London: Verso, 2007) 2.
7. See Michael Davidson's important essay "Missing Larry: The Poetics of Disability in Larry Eigner," *Concerto for the Left Hand: Disability and the Defamiliar Body* (Ann Arbor: U Michigan P, 2008) 116-41.
8. Larry Eigner, *The World and Its Streets, Places* (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow, 1977) 62.
9. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991) 18.
10. Readers of *Mediations* will of course recognize the foundational influence of Fredric Jameson's work on representation and cognitive mapping in this waypoint. In particular, in *Representing Capital*, Jameson discusses how Marx offers us a series of prisms, or windows, in his strategic, and infinitely incomplete, narration of capitalism as a total system. The hermeneutic of the limit marries those textual quilting points, where language finds its limits, with the political-economic limits to the capitalist system itself. See Fredric Jameson, *Representing Capital: A Reading of Volume One* (London: Verso, 2011).
11. Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke UP, 2011); Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (Chicago: U Chicago P, 2003); Timothy Morton, "An Object-Oriented Defense of Poetry," *New Literary History* 43 (2012): 205-24.
12. "MSA 15: Everydayness and the Event" <http://msa.press.jhu.edu/conferences/msa15/>. Accessed 20 February 2013.
13. See Steven Best and Sharon Marcus, "Surface Reading: An Introduction," *Representations* 108:1 (Fall 2009): 1-21.

## Infinity for Marxists

Christopher Nealon

... this is paradise

not for *people*  
but paradise  
regardless.<sup>1</sup>

In this short essay I'll try to identify some of the impulses guiding a recent turn to thinking about vastness in the critical-theoretical wing of the humanities, and to assess whether it might be put in dialogue with contemporary Marxist criticism. As readers of *Mediations* are no doubt aware, a wide variety of scholars in philosophy, literary criticism, and political theory are engaged in projects that re-scale their enterprise to suit what they take to be a larger world than the one we were able to study in the days of the linguistic turn. Two things in particular interest me about this interdisciplinary body of thinking: first, that its critique of "the human" is all but interchangeable with a critique of textual interpretation; and second, that this critique seems to replace a critique of capitalism. The intellectual center of gravity for this critique is in antihumanist strains of contemporary philosophy, but I am less interested in a "philosophical" critique of this infinity-discourse than I am in giving it just a touch of intellectual history, and in thinking about the very human perplexities and worries that may have led to its current allure.

The backdrop of this turn to the infinite is generally acknowledged to be the challenges posed by climate change, though many of the intellectual projects I have in mind express this only indirectly. More than a focus on climate or ecology as subject matter — though certainly some of this work does do that — the new infinity-scholarship shares across the disciplines an anti-humanism that is expressed as impatience with interpretation and with "texts" — that is to say, an impatience with the residues of poststructuralism, which in its universalization of critique as "reading" was the last great transdisciplinary paradigm shift.

This scholarly situation has led me to structure my thoughts here in something of a round-robin fashion, or at least a set of relays. What I'll be suggesting, below, is that this new anti-interpretive stance mistakenly equates Marxism with the deconstruction that critiqued it, rejects deconstruction while frequently repeating its key gestures, and swaps in ontology for epistemology in Christian language whose history it will not or cannot acknowledge. And it proposes as a method of (ana-) interpretation a stance toward reality that, in its insistence on the radical "autonomy" of non-human objects and relationships, delivers a critique, not of capitalism, or anti-democracy, but of scholarly self-absorption. Against this presumptuousness, which it links to overinvestment in texts, it proposes a limpid, un-rhetorical poetry of the world, which, when expressed as text, takes the form of litanies and lists that pale in comparison to the best actual poetry. So in what follows I'll be tracing how the new infinity-language both critiques poststructuralism in the language that poststructuralism used to critique Marxism, and implicitly repeats a second critique of Marxism also deployed by the poststructuralists, which worked by pitting Marxism against a certain idea of poetry. Then I'll turn to a poem that makes this opposition look shabby on both Marxist and poetic grounds. How this all plays out in the current idiom of infinity will take a little while to explain.

We might begin with its extent: this new language of the vast and the wide-open has touched several subfields, as we will see, but it is most immediately evident in literary ecocriticism. As the critic Cristin Ellis has pointed out, contemporary ecocritics have a strong anti-textualist bent. Ellis notes an overlap between critics as different as Lawrence Buell, who argues in his *Environmental Imagination* that theory served to "efface the world," and Ursula Heise, who contends in *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet* that environmentalist discourse has overdeveloped a tendency to "think locally," to the point where the latest ecocritics see their predecessors as having licensed what Ellis calls a "parochial presumptuousness."<sup>2</sup> The mark of this presumptuous parochialism is the environmentalist subject's projection of simple correspondences between herself and the wider world, which are made at the cost of investigating the alien variety of relations that are the wider world's moving parts.

More than any other contemporary ecocritic, Timothy Morton responds to this sense of literary theory's narrow gaze with a rhetoric of infinity. His 2010 book *The Ecological Thought* begins with a chapter called "Thinking Big," which concludes with an enthusiastic gloss on the mathematics of Georg Cantor, who conceived the concept of the "transfinite" — a number bigger than we can count, though it is only the hem of the garment of infinity "itself."<sup>3</sup> The epigraph to the volume, from Emmanuel Levinas's *Totality and Infinity*, frames Morton's argument in Cantorian terms: "Infinity overflows the thought which thinks it."

Gestures like these have placed Morton in alliance with the loosely-affiliated group of philosophers who have taken to calling themselves, at times, "speculative realists." Several of these philosophers practice what has come to be known as "object-oriented



ontology,” or OOO: a theory of being that, like Heidegger’s “sense of planet,” is organized by the imagination of a set of relations among entities that do not place the human being at their center. The best-known of these philosophers, Quentin Meillassoux, though he rejects affiliation with so-called OOO, nonetheless refers in his 2008 volume *After Finitude* to a “great outdoors” in which the mind is at last able to free itself from the philosophical equivalent to the parochialism Ellis sees ecocritics rejecting.<sup>4</sup> The word the speculative realists have come up with for that parochialism is “correlationism,” by which they mean a narrowing-down of the project of philosophy to endless iterations of the subject-object problem. For the speculative realists, Kant is the great enemy: by focusing on epistemological questions, he shackled philosophy to what subjects could know, leaving us ill-equipped to grapple with the kind of mind-bending ontological problems we must confront if we wish to understand globalization, the cosmos, environmental damage, or the deep time of the planet.

Not only ecocritics and young-turk philosophers, but literary critics and political theorists have made gestures that imply a vastness beyond textual analysis and after critical theory. Leah Price, in her recent *How to Do Things With Books in Victorian Britain*, opens by suggesting that “the transactions that enlist the books stretch far beyond the literary, or even the linguistic,” moving on to lambast recent critics of material culture for never getting down to the actual vastness of real books, and for clinging instead to “theory” at the cost of a posture both overweening and far too cramped: “the hermeneutics of suspicion has given way to a poetics of deflation...in the process, scholars change from the freest of associators into the most slavish of idiots savants.”<sup>5</sup> For the speculative realists, meanwhile, that hermeneutics is still a problem; praising the philosopher Alphonso Lingis, Graham Harman compares him favorably to what he takes to be the ongoing dominance of 1980s-style theory: “where [Lingis] is engaged with the flesh and pulp of the universe, contemporary fashions have turned primarily to the interpretation and deconstruction of texts.”<sup>6</sup>

Not infrequently, these declarations of the outmodedness of deconstruction either encode or modulate into a similar claim about Marxism: Marx may have been able to explain the class formations and the methods of accumulation that emerged in the industrial era, the argument goes, but he could not have foreseen the planetary consequences of what capital unleashed, which extend far beyond what his original categories could grasp. There are more and less subtle versions of this argument; among the most clear-eyed is to be found in Dipesh Chakrabarty’s 2008 essay “The Climate of History,” which adopts a pose of gratitude for how the “hermeneutics of suspicion” allowed postcolonial theorists to critique universality, then moves on to suggest that it is exactly universality that climate change obliges us to conceptualize.<sup>7</sup> Equating the post-structuralist “hermeneutics of suspicion” with the critique of capital, he writes:

Climate change, refracted through global capital, will no doubt accentuate the logic of inequality that runs through the rule of capital; some people will no doubt gain temporarily at the expense of others. But the whole crisis cannot be reduced to a story of capitalism. Unlike in the crises of capitalism, there are no lifeboats here for the rich and the privileged (witness the drought in Australia or recent fires in the wealthy neighborhoods of California).<sup>8</sup>

The problem here, of course, is that Marx's understanding of capitalism did not presume that the rich were immune to its effects. But the impulse to see Marxism as an outmoded vocabulary is too strong: so Chakrabarty goes on to reinvent the wheel of the dialectic, as it were, suggesting that because humanity cannot conceptualize itself as a species, at least not yet, we are at "the limits of historical understanding" and must make recourse to a "negative universal history."<sup>9</sup> The footnote in which Chakrabarty explains this coinage points right back to Adorno and Benjamin.

If the narrative of the obsolescence of Marxism is one side of the contemporary turn to deep time and infinity, then its other side is an anti-capitalism that has been entirely re-routed through philosophy. Speculative-realist thinkers like Reza Negarestani and Nick Srnicek have specifically thought through the question of whether contemporary philosophy might provide grounds for resisting or overcoming capital. But though Negarestani refers to capitalism as "the most recurring politico-economic figure of speculative thought," and Srnicek has written about it, they conceive of it in philosophical terms, as the great engine of "correlationsist" thinking: the problem with capitalism, for these thinkers, is that it creates an echo chamber that makes our minds small.<sup>10</sup> The capitalist problem that speculative realism seems best equipped to address, in other words, is not an actual dynamic of accumulation and exploitation, but the epistemological problem of capitalism's reduction of all phenomena to its own image. However revolutionary it may be in philosophical terms that these thinkers respond to capitalist epistemology not with a counter-epistemology but with an ontology, and however enthusiastically they may imagine subjects who think (or exist) entirely differently than the ones we know today, their anti-philosophical and anti-hermeneutic gestures are just that: anti-philosophical and anti-hermeneutic, not anti-capitalist.

To think dialectically, it seems, is not to think hugely enough, or infinitely enough. So how must we think, if we are to grapple with these unprecedented species-problems? As it turns out, in one way or another, the undialectical way we are urged to think, in this discourse, is *poetically* — but in a very particular sense, the sense that Archibald MacLeish was after in 1926 when he suggested a poem "should not mean but be."

In her recent *Vibrant Matter*, Jane Bennett champions the sheer alienness of the life of things: in their unknowability, especially in their unknowable relations to

each other and not to humanity, things point to a universe wider that we can ever grasp.<sup>11</sup> Bennett refers to this unknowability as the “recalcitrance” of the object world; her language quite closely recalls what speculative realists and object-ontologists like Graham Harman and Ray Brassier refer to as the “autonomy” of phenomena (including those it would be hard to call “objects”). This recalcitrance is poetic for Bennett — it leads her to include, along the course of her argument, short lists and parenthetical asides that function as a “poetry” that instances what she’s after:

one man’s large black plastic work glove  
 one dense mat of oak pollen  
 one unblemished dead rat  
 one white plastic bottle cap  
 one smooth stick of wood<sup>12</sup>

Bennett calls these lists “contingent tableaux” or “assemblages”: she shies away from calling them “poems” straight out, I think, because that would suggest that they *mean* something, and the contemporary language of infinitude depends on a critique of “meaning.” The tone in which this critique is delivered varies considerably: Morton affably turns to evolutionary theory for examples of non-teleological, non-adaptive features of animal life to argue on behalf of a big, raucous, non-meaning-intensive world.<sup>13</sup> He also turns to our experience of reading, which he suggests involves us assembling meaning out of patternless flux: as he puts it, “meaning depends on unmeaning.” By the end of the passage in which he makes this claim, encountering texts has become like encountering people, and the unknowability and meaninglessness of encountering others is not hell, as Sartre had it, but endlessness. “The stranger is infinity,” he writes: not meaning-bearing per se, but not quite meaningless, either.<sup>14</sup>

Brassier, for his part, critiques “meaning” in more Nietzschean terms. “Philosophers would do well to desist,” he writes in the preface to his *Nihil Unbound*,

from issuing any further injunctions about the need to re-establish the meaningfulness of existence, the purposefulness of life, or mend the shattered concord between man and nature. Philosophy should be more than a sop to the pathetic twinge of human self-esteem.<sup>15</sup>

For Brassier, whose *Nihil Unbound* is subtitled *Enlightenment and Extinction*, the relentless auto-critique of philosophical Enlightenment has disenchanted the world to the point where we may finally be able to absorb the traumatic knowledge of our individual deaths as well as the inevitable extinction of humanity. As with Morton and Bennett, in Brassier’s work the trap of “meaning” in the sense of “meaningfulness” is a result of a fixation on the human as the center and the limit of our sense of scale.<sup>16</sup>

Given the Nietzschean aggressivity of language like Brassier’s it should perhaps

come as no surprise to discover that the new infinity-rhetoric frequently expresses itself in theological terms, particularly as (anti-)Christologies of one kind or another. Brassier, for his part, is a champion of the philosopher François Laruelle, whose 2011 volume *Future Christ* bears a strong resemblance to most accounts of Meillassoux's soon-to-be-translated *Divine Inexistence*.<sup>17</sup> In Harman's gloss on the French edition of Meillassoux's book, he suggests that Meillassoux develops an unprecedented attitude toward God, to be distinguished from agnosticism, atheism, and so on. This position, as Harman renders it, is "believing in God because he does not exist." The key, it turns out, is that God does not exist...yet. This is the insight that Meillassoux claims to have uncovered in Stéphane Mallarmé's 1897 poem, *Un coup de dès jamais n'abolira le hasard*.<sup>18</sup>

But even if we agree with this reading of Mallarmé's poem as encoding a secret Christology, we needn't see it as unprecedented: there have been Future-Christos for a very long time. Just restricting ourselves to the modern era, we can find this stance in Schelling's idea of the "third age" of the world, the spiritual age, which describes a future dispensation in which a personalized "Christ" will no longer suffice as the vehicle for the unfolding of the spirit of Christianity on earth, which will one day demand a post-personal, spiritualized "Christ."<sup>19</sup> Meillassoux's famous critique of Hume reads this way, too, as an effacement of religious arguments that predate his own: for Meillassoux, the failure of Hume's critique of causality is to back away from sheer "factuality" (the possibility that anything could follow on anything else), which leads him to a watered-down probabilism.<sup>20</sup> But the Puritan preacher Jonathan Edwards, Hume's contemporary, got there long ago: read "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," and you'll see that his exhortation to his congregants is based on dispelling their probabilistic sense of the likelihood of grace by recourse to arguments and figures whose force is to suggest that God could do *anything* next, at any moment. Take that, probabilists!

Alongside these Christologies, meanwhile, is an array of other gestures in this contemporary current that have Catholic resonance. In the conclusion to *Vibrant Matter*, Bennett writes that she would like to end with a "litany, a kind of Nicene Creed" (the text of the "creed" runs, "I believe in one matter-energy, the maker of things seen and unseen. I believe that this pluriverse is traversed by heterogeneities that are continually doing things").<sup>21</sup> The videogame theorist Ian Bogost, too, is fond of the form of the litany, which like Bennett he owes to the work of Bruno Latour: in his recent *Alien Phenomenology*, Bogost describes writing a computer program that will generate what he calls "Latour litanies" — arrays of what we are asked to take as incommensurably different things (weather patterns, cleaning products, theories of history, hair gel) that, he thinks, have a mind-expanding effect on the too-humanistic, text-centered reader.<sup>22</sup> And though he does not frame them as litanies, per se, Graham Harman, too, imagines the list of incommensurables to have strong anti-hermeneutic power. In a recent essay, he frames one such list in a way that's meant as a kind of encrypted defense of the theological language to which he and his fellow travellers make recourse:

making human experience the homeland of all relations is no less outlandish than importing a theological concept of God into a philosophical sphere where faith no longer suffices as proof. In short, human experience has become the Almighty God of mainstream philosophy. Overmining has become the central dogma of our time: everything is relations, or language, or appearance to the mind. This dogma cannot be countered with an undermining theory that views the world as a partless, rumbling depth. What is missed in both cases is the autonomous reality of individual objects: dogs, trees, flames, monuments, societies, ghosts, gods, pirates, coins...<sup>23</sup>

There are a few sleights of hand worth noting in this passage. One is the way a rhetorical equivalence — two equally “outlandish” things, making God or humans the center of everything — is treated as a philosophical equivalence, as if the relationship between secular humanism and deism is that they are “opposites” in some formal sense, rather than positions with histories.

The second sleight of hand is related to the first: Harman reduces philosophy’s relationship to the question of “meaning” to two tidily opposed positions, which he calls “overmining” and “undermining” (roughly overinterpretation on one hand, and a monist insistence on miasmic, predifferentiated arche-materiality on the other), and then, having performed this reduction, produces a Third Way — not “overmining” or “undermining,” but the “autonomous reality of individual objects.” But in order to enjoy the clarity and radicality of this third option, we’ve had to switch from a critique of “meaning” to a celebration of “autonomy” — that is, to a different question and vocabulary altogether. That switch elides the question of whether there might be “meaning” in or around that radical autonomy. That the answer is “yes” — and that therefore Harman has failed to get away from even the artificially narrow scheme he thinks he’s demolished — that the answer is “yes” is clear from his list. It is a kind of poetry, in which words don’t distract us too much with meaning-play, but radiate, instead, both their own actuality and the actuality of the things they represent.

This anti-hermeneutic sense of poetry is old — perhaps as old as rhetoric. But for my purposes, it’s worth noticing not its oldness but its lability: reading Price’s testy denunciation of literary critics today as hidebound deconstructionists, obsessed with meaning and the critique of meaning, is not unlike reading the Derrida of “From Restricted to General Economy,” and watching him mock the Hegelianism of his day by characterizing it as a huffing, puffing bourgeois habit of thought of assigning historical meaning to everything under the sun — a habit which he and virtually every other poststructuralist felt needed not the actuality of a Marxism but the unbearable lightness of a Mallarmé, to banish it from the scene.<sup>24</sup> So the insurgent anti-hermeneuticists of the 1960s have now become the navel-gazing hermeneutists of the new millennium, and along the way, the critique of capital has been replaced



with a critique of *arrogance*. The poetry called forth to rectify the problem is still Mallarmé's (he is as beloved and exemplary for the speculative realists as he was for the poststructuralists they denounce): the poetry of being, not meaning; the poetry built out of words and not ideas; the poetry that limpidly presents us with an actuality, and spares us rhetoric, hermeneutics, and "grand theory."

But where is this poetry? It's not clear to me that we can find it in Mallarmé. Even if we could, his is only one location in a universe of brilliant twentieth-century poetry, much of which has struggled, not to replace thinking about some mere human bungle of capitalism with matters anterior to it, or more ontological, but to make poetry in and through the conditions the century gave us, not least the conditions of life under capital. Reading the postwar archive of anti-humanist thought, one wearies of the gestures opposing an arrogant, myopic criticism to a wide-open, ontologically pure poem-world; I find myself wishing for a critique of something other than arrogance, and for accounts of poetry other than those concerned to ratify the ontological dignity of the art. This is why, though I fear it will seem abrupt, I want to introduce you to a great poem now.

In the title poem of his 2013 volume *The Crisis of Infinite Worlds*, the Cincinnati-based poet Dana Ward constructs a framework for comparing two distinct modes of infinitude whose significance, he makes clear, is not simply their vastness, but that they have come into play in his poem in a here and now. The poem is framed on one hand by Ward's misremembering the title of a DC Comics series he came across at the mall, a series called *Crisis on Infinite Earths*. That twelve-part series, published in 1985, was designed to establish retroactive continuity among the many and contradictory plotlines that had accrued to the heroes and heroines in the DC universe over the decades. Meanwhile, the poem is also structured by its opening address to Krystle Cole, the young Kansas woman who was party to the last days of a massive LSD-producing outfit run by the now-imprisoned chemist William Leonard Pickard. Pickard's facility was built in a revamped missile silo; in a subsequent memoir, *Lysergic*, and in a series of popular YouTube videos, Cole recounts experiences of intense LSD trips in the months before Pickard's November 2000 arrest. So the poem is playfully framed both by reference to the question of how long a "pluriverse" of contradictory plotlines can last, and also by a sympathetic identification with the manner in which Cole describes the trippy, "lysergic" mind-bending which, depending on how the poet takes her tone, she either enjoyed or endured. It begins like this:

Krystle  
 Krystle Cole  
 you're all I thought about sometimes  
 I watched you while our daughter slept  
 your Sissy Spacek ways  
 your laconic demeanor in relaying



either ecstasy or trauma  
& the un-embittered empathy your voice conveyed  
on YouTube  
which is our loving cup  
the solution of butter  
& DMT you took  
anally that really made you  
freak the fuck out  
& your friends just stood there  
watching you  
as you hurtled alone through mirrored tunnels.<sup>25</sup>

What follows from this opening, already a richly articulated set of cross-currents of “empathy” and dispassion — devoted YouTube viewing, beloved children sleeping under parents’ gazes, friends looking away when they should attend to each other — is something like a super-compressed journey of the soul, not into Dante’s heaven so much as into the nature-less “universe” with which the ecocritics, object-ontologists, and speculative realists intend to beat back hermeneutics:

It’s that frictionless feeling  
the smooth & vacant course  
that lacks abruption, one wave  
the clinical mania undifferentiated  
whiteness  
contains when cylindrical cloud  
hard & plastic comes to represent  
the mind to the mind  
& thus describe a model  
of terrible momentum  
with unity of purpose  
toward nothing so much  
as cold, radiant nature  
stripped of Eros, of becoming,  
just the mainframe  
& its withering severity  
without any predicate  
of others, save perhaps their  
gazes, no walls,  
no nothing, completely  
white light & your name  
when your consciousness was

splitting time was stopping  
you were going always into that.<sup>26</sup>

Notice that the bare identificatory structure of address has not fallen away—that the poem is still, in the argot of infinity-theory, “correlationist.” The “you,” Cole, has all but stopped being a self in her encounter with this lysergic vastness; but she is still the object of the poet’s address. As we will see, this is not inadvertent, or a falling-away from some purer, more “speculative” form of thought — the project of the poem is emerging specifically as the attempt to think personless infinity *through persons*. Cole is not only his object: as his subject, she leads him to make a further set of comparisons. “You were always going into that,” he says, a little in awe; then

I was going always to the mall  
in those months,  
the young century’s rainiest  
April & May, to walk the  
baby & to understand my art.  
I didn’t understand.  
I would move the stroller  
through the halogen, over  
grooved tile & across those  
smooth marble expanses meant  
to simulate floating & gliding  
before that pure frictionless  
feeling was entire.<sup>27</sup>

Three time-scales — the centuries’, the months’, the time of reproduction — frame the poet’s quotidian struggle “to understand [his] art.” The problem of that art, it turns out, presents itself as the question of whether and how the “frictionless” feeling of lysergic wildness, its “terrible momentum,” has anything to do with the mall’s simulation of “floating & gliding” and how those pseudo-sensations build into something “entire.” It is tempting to say that the one, the mall, is a kind of bad totality, and the other, the trip, is its counterpart infinity, frightening but freer than that tiled enclosure. But the poem is not relying, as the theorists do, on a Levinasian frame, though infinity and totalization are surely in play. After all, the mall’s enclosure is a refuge, too, an infinity — well, he has more to say on that score.

Meanwhile, though, Ward is still trying to understand his art: pursuing the question of whether there’s a similarity or possibly an asymptotic relation between the two kinds of frictionlessness he’s describing, he finds himself wanting to cease pursuit. The connections between departments in the Sears he’s wandering through, he writes,

... felt  
 besieged or like a mask  
 for separation, they felt  
 like connection between us  
 in life but I didn't  
 take my allegory  
 further Krystle Cole, into your  
 lysergic delirium later redeemed  
 by a beautiful discipline  
 of spirit & cosmography  
 developed for praxis.<sup>28</sup>

It seems as though the question of likeness, posed as metaphor and metamorphosis — how is one thing like another? when does one space become another? — it's as though this question of likeness fails before the *ars poetica* of Krystle Cole, which is less a tracking of asymptotic mystery than a response to situations. He likes her latest video, “on candy / flipping hard & developing / ESP with friends”; it suggested to him, he writes, that:

... oneness  
 was a leavened mix  
 of random indiscretion,  
 bruising wariness, & bliss  
 obtained by synchronizing  
 chemical encounter.<sup>29</sup>

This is the kind of array of “objects” prized by Harman and others, when they make their litanies and lists. But the items in this array are not dignified by “autonomy” from us, or from each other. They are routed *through* each other; they are mediations of each other.

Part of the attraction of the Krystle-method, though, seems to be that it's more than the poet can muster. What he comes up with in the rest of the poem, instead, is a beautifully restless groping after ways to experience infinity and relation at the same time. Not all of them are nice; at least one of them depends on merging with capital.

Krystle,  
 there's a made up drug  
 I wonder if you'd do it?  
 Bradley Cooper, in *Limitless*  
 takes this little pill, which  
 in its candy dot translucence

looks a lot like a tear plucked  
 from the cheek in Man Ray's "Larmes."  
 With it, he can utilize  
 all of his brain, & so  
 he un-riddles the patterning  
 hidden in the ceaseless  
 flow of capital, structuring its  
 chaos in excess of any mortal  
 with a terrible momentum  
 & unity of purpose toward  
 nothing so much as pure profit  
 & complete subordination  
 of the world.<sup>30</sup>

I have to say that, when I read critiques of "correlationism" and how pinheaded it's supposedly made us all, how unequipped to think huge thoughts, I'm always reminded of the futurist meme that goes like, what could we become if we could use more of our brains? That the answer might be, "better capitalists!" is the wry implication of this passage, just as it's one of the concerns of a theorist like Catherine Malabou, whose recent *What Should We Do With Our Brain?* keeps in play the possibility — one the speculative realists do not — that "infinity" might be a mixed blessing.

Back at the mall, meanwhile, Ward has moved from the frictionless ease of illimitable surfaces to the junk-sundries of the smaller, less-profitable shops. It's here he encounters the comic book that makes the title of his poem, though, as he notes, he writes it down wrong, substituting "world" for "earth." Wondering what the relation might be between the two forms in the closing mediation of the poem, in which the poet tries once more to settle on whether the figure of the asymptote will serve him — is there a trajectory, he wonders, along which, after a certain point, "earth" becomes "world"? "That same May," he writes,

I had gone to Detroit. I saw  
 the most wonderful graffiti, more  
 a prayer, written on a wall  
 in magic marker, it read —

Two Things:

- 1) That we would grow closer & closer as time progresses.
- 2) That our ships would not crash.<sup>31</sup>

Ever closer, never crashing — a mystical union, and a Zeno's paradox, worthy of Dante. But at the end of the poem, as throughout, it's less infinity as math than as

relation, that reveals itself as the subject of the poem; we can sense this in the way that, turning away from Cole and addressing himself in loneliness, he remarks on the medium in which the graffiti was rendered:

Magic marker on a  
surface doesn't have  
much depth of skin.  
You move it smoothly  
on the wall & it stays smooth  
barely records the softest friction  
of two separate textures meeting.  
The wetness of its onyx  
dries quick or even quicker  
if you blow on it with circled lips,  
like clouds in old maps  
that blew ships across a flat earth  
to an edge I don't exactly  
not idealize.<sup>32</sup>

It's a textureless texture — "magic," industrial — that recalls the frictionless floors of the shopping mall. But it can't help but be marked by how it renders: you can blow on it to make it dry faster. Does the image that the blowing generates, an image of the edge of the world, allow the ink to retain a trace of its separateness from us, its ontological "autonomy"? Perhaps. But I think we would misread the poem if we saw that breath as a ratcheting-down from illimitability into myopic human meaning-making. The poem does not split the difference between these two things, autonomy and solipsism, so much as upend the idea that they are the relevant opposition. In the terms it sets up, infinity and relation are not opposites — they are shot through with each other, as much in nausea and "wariness" as in synchrony and bliss. They make and are made by *texture* — by what we might call, in a more academic vocabulary, mediation. This also means, of course, that the activities the poem describes are precisely what we are urged, in this latest post-Marxism, to dismiss as merely "human": they are dialectical.

This seems to me the great error of the critique of humanism when it conjoins with the critique of hermeneutics: the idea that scrutiny and attention are somehow essentially englobing. This seems a displacement of a critique of the social divisions that separate scholarship from politics onto the mechanics of the scholarship. It is not reductive and parochial to read a poem closely, or to read poems for a living; it is reductive and parochial to do so in a world where that activity is cordoned off from the others that support it. In a world where every professor was also a janitor, would we really find close reading so myopic?

Ward ends his poem with a fragment:

That somewhere  
 there's a precipice in this world & tracing  
 my finger along those ardent lines  
 I'd found the fault of it  
 a little, in its boldness far too faint  
 & not enough.<sup>33</sup>

He's been at the mall, thinking of a girl in a missile silo; he's wanting to find a crack in the world that by way of enclosure separates us and pits us against each other. But the opposition isn't between the mere human world and the vaster universe that teaches us humility by ignoring us; it's between the quality of paradise in the world that is and the hints of paradise in the world that might be. Before the closing lines I cited above, the poet asks Cole a sinuous, twenty-six-line long double question — one so long it doesn't conclude with a question mark. It goes like this:

Krystle, have you ever,  
 just standing around,  
 noticed someone smoking  
 in an older silver Volvo  
 & watched the comeback feelings  
 of a Tupac Easter Sunday  
 steep in their ambivalent features  
 until they are more radiant  
 than cinematic virgins  
 having lost it in the wake  
 of Saint Maria Goretti  
 whose patronage is lost  
 to the brutalized sweetness  
 of her charges  
 when depicted in the mind  
 & reconstructed  
 as a low-res simulation  
 by scientists the weekend  
 Wall Street's occupied & particles  
 are found to go  
 faster than light  
 then weirdly feel like  
 this is paradise  
 not for *people*  
 but paradise  
 regardless.<sup>34</sup>



This virtuosic query is built around a series of dazzling shifts of focus and scale. We begin with the becoming-auratic of a particular, anonymous face, which moves outward from the resurrection-discourse around the remembered person of Tupac Shakur into the traces of holiness in the unnumbered “charges” of the Catholic saint and martyr Maria Goretti (who was raped and murdered in 1902). Then we’re suddenly in a particular weekend, a here and now, in which advances in brain research and particle acceleration collide with the protestors in Zuccotti Park. The wedging of the occupation in between the technical advances seems to serve as a kind of spar: on one hand, sheer variety and juxtaposition propose a paradise, but the middle term in that variety sticks in paradises’s craw. And the “weird” feeling the poet describes comes from a discovery that we are blocked from paradise, not by the way vastness makes us minuscule, but by how our social arrangements make it impossible to explore vastness except on technical terms.<sup>35</sup>

I’ve taken this time to walk through Ward’s poem — which deserves much closer reading than I’ve provided here — because I think it gives the lie to the anti-hermeneutic anti-humanism on offer in the new discourse of infinity today. One reason for this, as I hope I’ve at least sketched here, is that Ward’s poem does not rely on a false dichotomy between “humanity” and “infinity,” working instead to co-locate life under capital with something like the varieties of infinite experience.

So can Marxists learn from this latest anti-humanist turn? Certainly we’ve had our day with language like this, not least by way of Althusser — whose youthful involvement with the organization Action Catholique, and late desire for an audience with Pope John Paul II, suggests that more research is needed on the relation between secular and religious critiques of humanist presumptuousness.<sup>36</sup> And it’s true that Marxist scholars in the humanities lag behind activists, and scholars in the social sciences, in thinking through ways to link environmental crises to the critique of capital without using the either-or vocabulary on offer in the infinity-discourse. The geographers and the sociologists are way out ahead.

But we’ll catch up. Perhaps the lesson to be learned from the latest turn to infinity is that it would help to understand the need behind the desire to critique humanist hubris and textual interpretation. Is it just the confluence of a long Catholic tradition with the hangover from poststructuralism? Is it a way for Left-leaning liberals, grappling with feelings of powerlessness in the face of environmental destruction, to direct those feelings at themselves, in a masochistic anti-humanist discourse whose structure of feeling is something like species-shame? Or is it an attempt to import the wonder, if not the method, of the sciences into the life of the humanities? It is likely all of these. And as we seize the opportunity of the revival of interest in Marx to learn and to struggle, we could no doubt incorporate a sensitive awareness of this latest turn’s coordinates, even if it’s not to incorporate the terms of that turn itself, which don’t provide what Marxism needs today. No shame; more poetry.

## Notes

1. Dana Ward, *The Crisis of Infinite Worlds* (New York: Futurepoem, 2013) 37.
2. Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1996); Ursula K. Heise, *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008); Cristin Ellis, *Political Ecologies: The Contingency of Nature in American Romantic Thought*. Dissertation (Johns Hopkins University, 2012) 6-12.
3. Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2010).
4. Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (London: Continuum, 2008) 7.
5. Leah Price, *How to Do Things with Books in Victorian England* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2010) 19-22.
6. Graham Harman, *Guerilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things* (Chicago: Open Court, 2005) 61.
7. Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History: Four Theses," *Critical Inquiry* 35 (Winter 2009): 197-222.
8. Chakrabarty, "Climate" 221.
9. "Climate" 222.
10. Reza Negarestani, "Drafting the Inhuman: Conjectures on Capitalism and Organic Necrocracy," *The Speculative Turn*, eds. Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek, and Graham Harman (Melbourne: re.press, 2011) 182, and Nick Srnicek, "Capitalism and the Non-Philosophical Subject," *The Speculative Turn* 164-81.
11. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke UP, 2010).
12. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter* 4.
13. Morton, *Ecological Thought* 73.
14. *Ecological Thought* 80.
15. Ray Brassier, *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007) xi.
16. In his turn to Freud's notion of the death drive as a conceptual resource for his argument about the unassimilability of the fact our death and extinction, Brassier repeats the work of Leo Bersani, who in 1986 had already argued in *The Freudian Body* that psychoanalysis, in its inability to adequately assimilate the self-shattering aspects of sexuality into discourse, was a kind of "epistemological catastrophe" that, in its attempt to "coerce" the unassimilable "into discourse," keeps us at a remove from "any consciousness of being" (30, 40). Bersani's counterposing of epistemology and ontology, and his attachment of negative and positive values to the two, respectively, does not only predate the key gesture of the speculative turn, but grounds it in what would become a specific, anti-identitarian queer politics.
17. François Laruelle, *Future Christ: A Lesson in Heresy*, trans. Anthony Paul Smith (London: Continuum, 2010).
18. Meillassoux claims to have uncovered this truth in Mallarmé (he treats it as a truth, not an interpretation) in *The Number and The Siren: A Decipherment of Mallarmé's Coup De Des* (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2012).
19. See Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling, *The Ages of The World*, trans. Jason M. Wirth (Binghamton: SUNY P, 2000). Karl Löwith provides a useful medieval back-history to Schelling's dispensational model in the passages on Joachim of Fiore in his *Meaning in History: The Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1957). Joachim's sense of dispensational time as subject, moment-to-moment, to utter transformation, also forms part of the history behind Hume and Edwards.

20. Meillassoux, *After Finitude* 82-111.
21. *Vibrant Matter* 122.
22. Ian Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology, or, What It's Like to Be a Thing* (Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 2012) 94.
23. Graham Harman, "Realism without Materialism," *SubStance* 40:2 (2011): 71.
24. I make this argument at greater length in *The Matter of Capital: Poetry and Crisis in the American Century* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2011).
25. Ward, *Crisis* 32.
26. *Crisis* 32-33.
27. *Crisis* 33.
28. *Crisis* 34.
29. *ibid.*
30. Ward, *Crisis* 34-35.
31. Ward, *Crisis* 37.
32. *ibid.*
33. Ward, *Crisis* 38.
34. Ward, *Crisis* 36-37.
35. The "weird" feeling Ward describes bears some relation to a certain "weirdness" prized by the speculative realists in the work of the horror writer H.P. Lovecraft, whose writing in pulp venues like *Weird Tales* gave to horror a specifically cosmic dimension: perhaps, many of the tales suggest, the universe is entirely indifferent to humanity. That Ward identifies this feeling, but also feels it differently, suggests that there is no necessary relation between the awareness of that indifference and the implications — generic, tonal, political — one draws from it. See Graham Harman, *Weird Realism: Lovecraft and Philosophy* (Alresford: Zero, 2012), and Eugene Thacker, *In the Dust of This Planet: Horror of Philosophy, Volume 1* (Alresford: Zero, 2011).
36. See Richard Wolin, *The Wind from The East: French Intellectuals, the Cultural Revolution, and the Legacy of the 1960s* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2010) 212.



## The Anthropocene as Fetishism

Daniel Cunha

"A society that is always sicker, but always stronger, has everywhere concretely re-created the world as the environment and decor of its illness, a *sick planet*."<sup>1</sup>

The "Anthropocene" has become a fashionable concept in the natural and social sciences.<sup>2</sup> It is defined as the "human-dominated geologic epoch," because in this period of natural history it is Man who is in control of the biogeochemical cycles of the planet.<sup>3</sup> The result, though, is catastrophic: the disruption of the carbon cycle, for example, leads to a global warming that approaches tipping points that might be irreversible.<sup>4</sup> The exponential growth of our freedom and power, that is, of our ability to transform nature, is now translated into a limitation to our freedom, including the destabilization of the very framework of life. It reaches its highest degree with the problem of global warming.<sup>5</sup> In this context, it becomes clear that the Anthropocene is a contradictory concept. If the "human-dominated geologic epoch" is leading to a situation in which the existence of humans might be at stake, there is something very problematic with this sort of domination of Nature that reduces it to a "substrate of domination" that should be investigated.<sup>6</sup> Its very basic premise, that it is *human*-dominated, should be challenged — after all there should be something *inhuman* or objectified in a sort of domination whose outcome might be human extinction.

What is claimed here is that, exactly as for freedom, the Anthropocene is an unfulfilled promise. The same way that freedom in capitalism is constrained by fetishism and class relations — capitalist dynamics are law-bound and beyond the control of individuals; the workers are "free" in the sense that they are not "owned" as slaves, but also in the sense that they are "free" from the means of production, they are deprived of their conditions of existence; the capitalists are "free" insofar as they follow the objectified rules of capital accumulation, otherwise they go bankrupt — so is the social metabolism with Nature. Therefore, I claim that the Anthropocene is the fetishized form of interchange between Man and Nature historically specific to capitalism, the same way as the "invisible hand" is the fetishized form of "freedom" of interchange between men.

Since primitive accumulation, capital caused a metabolic rift between Man and Nature. It was empirically observable at least since the impoverishment of soils caused by the separation between city and countryside in nineteenth-century Great

Britain.<sup>7</sup> In the twenty-first century, though, this rift is globalized, including critical disruptions of the carbon cycle (global warming), the nitrogen cycle, and the rate of biodiversity loss that implies that humanity is already outside of a “safe operating space” of global environmental conditions.<sup>8</sup> The Anthropocene, appears, then, as the globalized disruption of global natural cycles — and, most importantly, not as a (for whatever reason) planned, intentional, and controlled disruption, but as an unintended side effect of social metabolism with Nature that seems to be progressively *out of control*. It can easily be illustrated with examples. In the case of the carbon cycle, the burning of fossil fuels is carried out as an energy source for industrial and transport systems. Massive coal extraction began in England during the Industrial Revolution so that, with this new mobile energy source, industries could move from near dams to the cities where cheap labor was.<sup>9</sup>

There was no intention to manipulate the carbon cycle or to cause global warming, or any consciousness of it. The result, though, is that, in the twenty-first century, atmospheric carbon dioxide concentration is already beyond the safe boundary of 350 ppm for long-term human development. As for the nitrogen cycle, it was disrupted by the industrialization of agriculture and fertilizer production, including the fixation of atmospheric nitrogen with the Haber-Bosch process. Again, there was no intention or plan to control the nitrogen cycle, to cause eutrophication of lakes, or to induce the collapse of ecosystems. Once again, the boundary of sixty-two million tons of nitrogen removed from the atmosphere per year is by far already surpassed, with 150 million tons in 2014.<sup>10</sup> A similar story could be told about the rate of biodiversity loss, and the phosphorous cycle and ocean acidification are following the same pattern. The “human-dominated” geologic epoch, in this regard, seems much more a product of chance and *unconsciousness* than of a proper control of the global material cycles, in spite of Crutzen’s reference to Vernadsky’s and Chardin’s “increasing consciousness and thought” and “world of thought” (noösphere). “They do not know it, but they do it” — this is what Marx said about the fetishized social activity mediated by commodities, and this is the key to a critical understanding of the Anthropocene.<sup>11</sup>

In fact, Crutzen locates the beginning of the Anthropocene in the design of the steam engine during the Industrial Revolution.<sup>12</sup> However, instead of seeing it as a mere empirical observation, the determinants of the “human-dominated” geologic epoch should be conceptually investigated in the capitalist form of social relations. With his analysis of fetishism, Marx showed that capitalism is a social formation in which there is a prevalence of “material relations between persons and social relations between things,” in which “the circulation of money as capital is an end in itself.”<sup>13</sup> Capital is the inversion where exchange value directs use, abstract labor directs concrete labor: “a social formation in which the process of production has mastery over man, instead of the opposite,” and its circulation as money and commodities for the sake of accumulation constitutes the “automatic subject,” “self-valorizing value.”<sup>14</sup> Locating the Anthropocene in capitalism, therefore, implies an investigation



into the relation between the Anthropocene and alienation, or, as further developed by the late Marx, *fetishism*.<sup>15</sup> This is the core of the contradictions of the “human-dominated” geologic epoch. According to Marx, the labor-mediated form of social relations of capitalism acquires a life of its own, independent of the individuals that participate in its constitution, developing into a sort of objective system over and against individuals, and increasingly determines the goals and means of human activity. Alienated labor constitutes a social structure of abstract domination that alienates social ties, in which “starting out as the condottiere of use value, exchange value ended up waging a war that was entirely its own.”<sup>16</sup> This structure, though, does not appear to be socially constituted, but natural.<sup>17</sup> Value, whose phenomenic form of appearance is money, becomes in itself a form of social organization, a perverted community. This is the opposite of what could be called “social control.”<sup>18</sup> A system that becomes quasi-automatic, beyond the conscious control of those involved, and is driven by the compulsion of limitless accumulation as an end-in-itself, necessarily has as a consequence the disruption of the material cycles of the Earth. Calling this “Anthropocene,” though, is clearly imprecise, on one hand, because it is the outcome of a historically specific form of metabolism with Nature, and not of a generic ontological being (*antropo*), and, on the other hand, because capitalism constitutes a “domination without subject,” that is, in which the subject is not Man (not even a ruling class), but capital.<sup>19</sup>

It is important to note that fetishism is not a mere illusion that should be deciphered, so that the “real” class and environmental exploitation could be grasped. As Marx himself pointed out, “to the producers...the social relations between their private labors appear as what *they are*, i.e., as material relations between persons and social relations between things”; “commodity fetishism...is not located in our minds, in the way we (mis)perceive reality, but in our social reality itself.”<sup>20</sup> That is why not even all scientific evidence of the ecological disruption, always collected *post festum*, is able to stop the destructive dynamic of capital, showing to a caricatural degree the uselessness of knowledge without use.<sup>21</sup> The fact that now “they know very well what they are doing, yet they are doing it” does not refute, but rather *confirms* that the form of social relations is beyond social control, and merely changing the name of the “Anthropocene” (to “Capitolocene” or whatever) would not solve the underlying social and material contradictions.<sup>22</sup> Value-directed social production, that is, production determined by the minimization of socially necessary labor time, results in an objectified mode of material production and social life that can be described by “objective” laws. Time, space, and technology are objectified by the law of value. Of course the agents of the “valorization of value” are human beings, but they perform their social activity as “character [masks],” “personifications of economic relations”: the capitalist is personified capital and the worker is personified labor.<sup>23</sup> The fetishistic, self-referential valorization of value through the exploitation of labor (M-C-M') with its characteristics of limitless expansion and abstraction of material

content implies the ecologically disruptive character of capitalism, that is, that in capitalism “the development of productive forces is simultaneously the development of destructive forces.”<sup>24</sup> Self-expanding value creates an “industrial snowball system” that is not consciously controlled, “a force independent of any human volition.”<sup>25</sup> In this context, it is not a surprise that the disruption of global ecological cycles is presented as the “Anthropocene,” that is, as a concept allusive to a *natural process*. That Man is presented as a blind *geologic force*, such as volcanic eruptions or variations in solar radiation, is an expression of the naturalized or *fetishized* form of social relations that is prevalent in capitalism.

Therefore, the technical structures with which Man carries out its metabolism with Nature is logically marked by fetishism. As Marx noted, “technology reveals the active relation of man to nature, the direct process of the production of his life, and thereby it also lays bare the process of the production of the social relations of his life, and of the mental conceptions that flow from those relations.”<sup>26</sup> In capitalism, production processes are not designed according to the desires and needs of the producers, ecological or social considerations, but according to the law of value. Taking as an example the world energy systems, it has been demonstrated that there is no technical constraint to a complete solar transition in two or three decades if we consider the use-value of fossil and renewable energies (their energy return and material requirements), that is, it is technically feasible to use fossil energy to build a solar infrastructure to provide world energy in a quantity and quality sufficient for human development.<sup>27</sup> This transition, which from the point of view of use-value or material wealth is desirable, necessary, and urgent (due to global warming) is not being carried out, though, because fossil energy is still more prone to capital accumulation, to the valorization of value: capital went to China to exploit cheap labor and cheap coal, causing a strong spike in carbon emissions on the eve of a climate emergency, in a clear display of fetishistic irrationality.<sup>28</sup> More generally, the American ecologist Barry Commoner showed that in the twentieth century many synthetic products were developed (such as plastics and fertilizers) that took the place of natural and biodegradable products. However, the new products were not better than the old ones; the transition was only carried out because it was more lucrative to produce them, although they were much more polluting and environmentally harmful — in fact it is shown that these new technologies were the main factor for the increase of pollution in the United States, more than the increase in population or consumption.<sup>29</sup>

Of course the law of value does not determine only the final products, but also the production processes, which must be constantly intensified both in terms of rhythms and material efficiency, if not in terms of the extension of the working day. Already, in his day, Marx highlighted the “fanaticism that the capitalist shows for economizing on means of production” as they seek the “refuse of production” for reuse and recycling.<sup>30</sup> However, under the capitalist form of social production, productivity

gains result in a smaller amount of value created per material unit, so that it fosters enlarged material consumption.<sup>31</sup> This general tendency is empirically observable in the so-called Jevons Paradox, when efficiency gains eventually result in a rebound effect, increased material production.<sup>32</sup> It was first shown by William Stanley Jevons, who presented data that demonstrate that the economy of coal in steam engines during the Industrial Revolution resulted in increased coal consumption.<sup>33</sup> What in a conscious social production would be ecologically beneficial (increased efficiency in resource use), in capitalism increases relative surplus-value, and therefore reinforces the destructive limitless accumulation of capital and a technological system that is inappropriate in the first place. It is astonishing that many environmentalists still preach efficiency as an ecological fix, without noticing that the capitalist social form of wealth (value) turns productivity into a destructive force.

Even the way capitalism deals with the problem of pollution is configured by alienation: everything can be discussed, *but* the mode of production based on commodification and maximization of profits. As production is carried out in competing isolated private production units, socio-technical control is limited to external control, through state regulations that enforce end-of-pipe technologies and market mechanisms. The Kyoto Protocol is the best example of market mechanism. It represents the commodification of the carbon cycle, establishing the equivalence principle, the very form of commodity fetishism, in a sort of stock exchange of carbon. Therefore, it implies a whole process of abstraction of ecological, social, and material qualities to make possible the equivalence of carbon emissions, offsets, and carbon sinks located in very different ecological and social contexts. The abstraction process includes the equalization of emission reductions in different social and ecological contexts, of emissions reductions carried out with different technologies, of carbon of fossil origin and biotic origin, the equalization of different molecules through the concept of “carbon equivalent” and a definition of “forest” that does not include any requirement of biodiversity.<sup>34</sup>

However, as with any commodity in capitalism, use-value (carbon emissions reductions) is governed by exchange-value. The fetishistic inversion of use-value and exchange-value that characterizes capitalism implies that the effective goal of the whole process of emissions trading comes to be money, not emissions reduction. Empirical examples abound. The trading scheme does not present any incentive for long-term technology transition, but only for short-term financial earnings (time is money). Offsets in practice allow polluters to postpone a technological transition, while the corresponding Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) project probably generates a rebound effect that will foster fossil fuel deployment in developing countries.<sup>35</sup> Easy technological reductions, such as burning methane in landfills, allow the continuation of carbon emissions by big corporations. Some industries earned more profits mitigating emissions of HFC-23 than with the commodities they produced, while generating huge amounts of offsets that again allow polluters to

keep up with their emissions.<sup>36</sup> And the comparison of projects with baseline “would be” scenarios even tragically allows the direct increase of emissions, for example, by financing coal mines that mitigate methane emissions. And more examples could be cited. The fact that global warming is determined by cumulative emissions in any meaningful human time-scale reveals the perverse effects of this exchange-value-driven scheme: delays in emissions reductions today constrain the possibilities of the future.<sup>37</sup> Again, as could be grasped beforehand with a simple theoretical Marxian critique, exchange-value becomes dominant over use-value, as the allocation of carbon emissions is determined not by socio-ecological criteria, but according to the valorization requirements or by “the optimized allocation of resources” — when the global carbon market hit the record market value of 176 billion dollars in 2011, the World Bank said that “a considerable portion of the trades is primarily motivated by hedging, portfolio adjustments, profit taking, and arbitrage,” typical jargon of financial speculators.<sup>38</sup> Kyoto, with its quantitative approach, does not address, and hampers, the *qualitative* transition that is necessary to avoid a catastrophic climate change, that is, the solar transition. Even though substantial amounts of capital are mobilized with the trading schemes, global carbon emissions continue to increase.

In this scenario, it is increasingly likely that the application of an end-of-pipe technology might be necessary. With the rise of the Welfare State and ecological regulation, a myriad of such technologies were used to mitigate industrial emissions to water, air, and soil — air filters, wastewater treatment plants, etc. The problem is that these technologies can only be applied in particular corporate units if it is feasible in the context of value-driven production, that is, only if it does not jeopardize the profitability of corporations. It happens, though, that carbon capture and storage (CCS) is still too expensive to be used in production units or transport systems. Therefore, what comes to the fore is *geoengineering*, the ultimate end-of-pipe technology, the technological mitigation of the effects of carbon emissions on a planetary scale, the direct manipulation of world climate itself — with the use of processes such as the emission of aerosols to the stratosphere to reflect solar radiation, or the fertilization of oceans with iron to induce the growth of carbon-sequestering algae.<sup>39</sup> Its origins can be traced back to the Vietnam War and Stalinist projects, and one of its first proponents was Edward Teller, the father of the atomic bomb.<sup>40</sup> There are huge risks involved in this approach, as the climate system and its subsystems are not fully understood and are subject to non-linearities, tipping points, sudden transitions, and chaos. Besides, climate system inertia implies that global warming is irreversible in the time scale of a millennium, so that such geoengineering techniques would have to be applied for an equal amount of time, what would be a burden for dozens of future generations.<sup>41</sup> In case of technological failure of the application of geoengineering, the outcome could be catastrophic, with a sudden climate change.<sup>42</sup>

Considering its relatively low cost, though, it is likely that capitalism assumes the risk of business as usual in order to preserve its fetishistic quest for profits, keeping

geoengineering as a sort of silver bullet of global warming.<sup>43</sup> Of course there is the frightening possibility of combining geoengineering and trading schemes, so that geoengineering projects could generate carbon credits in a competitive market. That was the idea of Planktos Inc. in a controversial experiment of ocean fertilization, that alludes to a dystopian future in which world climate is manipulated according to the interests of corporate profits.<sup>44</sup> It is clear that capitalist control of pollution, either through market mechanisms or state regulations, resembles the Hegelian Minerva's Owl: it only (re)acts *after* the alienated process of production and the general process of social alienation. However, if the core of destructiveness is the fetishistic process itself that is reproduced by trading schemes, and end-of-pipe technologies are subject to failure and complex dynamics that are not rationally accessible to the time scales of human institutions (at least in their current forms), both market and state mechanisms might fail in avoiding a catastrophic climate change.

Future projections of global warming by neoclassical economists reveal the alienated core of the Anthropocene in its very essence. In integrated climate-economic models such as the ones developed by William Nordhaus and Nicholas Stern, the interest rate ultimately determines what is acceptable in terms of atmospheric concentration of greenhouse gases and its related impacts (coastal inundations, biodiversity loss, agricultural disruption, epidemic outbreaks, etc.), as "cost-benefit analyses" discount future impacts and compound present earnings.<sup>45</sup> But as shown by Marx, the interest is the part of the profit that the industrial capitalist pays to the financial capitalist that lent him money-capital in the first place, after the successful valorization process.<sup>46</sup> Interest-bearing capital is value that possesses the use-value of creating surplus-value or profit. Therefore, "in interest-bearing capital the capital relationship reaches its most superficial and fetishized form," "money that produces money," "self-valorizing value."<sup>47</sup> Interest-bearing capital is the perfect fetishistic representation of capital, as the automatic geometric progression of surplus-value production, a "pure automaton."<sup>48</sup> Correspondingly, the determination of future social metabolism with Nature by the interest rate is the ultimate expression of the fetishistic character of this historical form of social metabolism with Nature, that is, of the fetishistic core of the so-called Anthropocene, no matter the magnitude of the interest rate. In capitalism the interest rate is determinant of investments and allocation of resources, and overcoming this is not a matter of moralistically (and unrealistically) using a lower magnitude for the interest rate as Stern does, but of overcoming the capitalist mode of production itself.<sup>49</sup>

Future scenarios determined by the interest rate ultimately negate history, since only in capitalism the interest rate is socially determining, as it is capital in its purest form. While in capitalism interest-bearing capital becomes totally adapted to the conditions of capitalist production, and fosters it with the development of the credit system, in pre-capitalist social formations, "usury impoverishes the mode of production, cripples the productive forces."<sup>50</sup> This is so because in capitalism credit



is given in the expectation that it will function as capital, that the borrowed capital will be used to valorize value, to appropriate unpaid “free” labor, while in the Middle Ages the usurer exploited petty producers and peasants working for themselves.<sup>51</sup> The determination of future social metabolic relation with Nature by the interest rate is thus an extrapolation of the capitalist mode of production and all of its categories (value, surplus-value, abstract labor, etc.) into the future, the fetishization of history — again, this is in line with the term *Anthropocene*, that makes reference to an ahistorical Man.

Besides, the sort of cost-benefit analysis that Nordhaus and Stern carry out tends to negate not only history, but matter itself, as the trade-off of the degradation of material resources with the abstract growth implies the absolute exchangeability between different material resources, and hence between abstract wealth (capital) and material wealth, which in practice is a false assumption. For example, the most basic natural synthetic process necessary for life as we know on Earth, photosynthesis, is not technologically substitutable, that is, no amount of exchange-value could replace it.<sup>52</sup> Besides, synthesizing the complex interactions and material and energy fluxes that constitute ecosystems of different characteristics and scales, with their own path-dependent natural histories, is not at all a trivial task — material interactions and specificity are exactly what exchange-value abstracts from. What this sort of analysis takes for granted is commodity-form itself, with its common substance (value) that allows the exchange between different material resources in definite amounts, detached from their material and ecological contexts. But it is this very detachment or abstraction that leads to destructiveness. “The dream implied by the capital form is one of utter boundlessness, a fantasy of freedom as the complete liberation from matter, from nature. This ‘dream of capital’ is becoming the nightmare of that from which it strives to free itself — the planet and its inhabitants.”<sup>53</sup>

Last but not least, capital is also trying to increase its profits exploiting the very anxiety caused by the prospect of the ecological catastrophe, as an extension of the production of subjectivity by the culture industry.<sup>54</sup> For example, Starbucks cafés offer their customers a coffee that is a bit more expensive, but claim that part of the money goes to the forest of Congo, poor children in Guatemala, etc. This way, political consciousness is depoliticized in what is called the “Starbucks effect.”<sup>55</sup> It can also be seen in commercial advertisements. In one of them, after scenes depicting some kind of undefined natural catastrophe intercalated with scenes of a carpenter building an undefined wooden structure and women in what seems to be a fashion show, the real context is revealed: the models are going to a sort of Noah’s Arc built by the carpenter, so that they can survive the ecological catastrophe. The purpose of the advertisement is finally disclosed: to sell deodorant — “the final fragrance.” The slogan — “Happy end of the world!” — explicitly exploits the ecological collapse to sell commodities.<sup>56</sup> Opposition and political will themselves are being seduced to fit into the commodity form, even pervading climate science itself. Some scientists



seem to notice this pervasive pressure of economic fetishism over science when they state: “liberate the science from the economics, finance, and astrology, stand by the conclusions however uncomfortable” or “geoengineering is like a heroin addict finding a new way of cheating his children out of money.”<sup>57</sup> Decarbonization is always challenged to be “economically feasible.” What is necessary, though, is that a more radical critique come to the fore in the public debate, an explicitly anticapitalist stance that refuses the requirements of capital accumulation in the definition of socio-environmental policies — not the least because it seems it is already impossible to reconcile the limitation of global warming to two degrees Celsius and simultaneously keep “economic growth.”<sup>58</sup>

It must be highlighted that the fetishization here described and its ecological destructiveness are a historical development, specific to capitalism, and that is why it can be overcome: the social metabolism with nature is not necessarily destructive. Commodity fetishism and labor as the social-mediating category (abstract labor) are historically specific to capitalism, and began with primitive accumulation.<sup>59</sup> The Anthropocene as the globalized disruption of Nature is the externalization of alienated labor, its logical material conclusion.<sup>60</sup> Overcoming it requires the reappropriation of what has been constituted in alienated form, that is, the decommodification of human social activity or the overcoming of capitalism.<sup>61</sup> Technology so reconfigured and socialized would no longer be determined by profitability, but would be the technical translation of new values, and would tend to become art.<sup>62</sup> Instead of being determined by the unidimensional valorization of value, social production would be the outcome of a multiplicity of commonly discussed criteria, ranging from social, ecological, aesthetic, and ethical considerations, and beyond — in other words, material wealth should be freed from the value-form. Technologies such as solar energy, microelectronics, and agroecology, for example, could be used to shape a world of abundant material wealth and a conscious social metabolism with Nature — a world with abundant clean renewable energy, abundant free social time due to the highly automated productive forces, and abundant food ecologically produced, under social control.<sup>63</sup>

Then and only then Man could be in conscious control of planetary material cycles and could use this control for human ends (even if deciding to keep them in their “natural” state). In fact, this means taking the promise of the Anthropocene very seriously, that is, Man *should* take conscious control of planetary material cycles, extend the terrain of the political hitherto left to the blind mechanics of nature and, in capitalism, to commodity fetishism.<sup>64</sup> And this not only because the productive forces developed by capitalism allow it — although up to now we do it without conscious social control — but also because it might be necessary. Civilization is adapted to the Holocenec conditions that prevailed in the last ten thousand years, and we should be prepared to act to preserve these conditions that allow human development, or mitigate sudden changes, because they could be challenged not only by human (fetishized)

activity, but also by natural causes, what already occurred many times in natural history (such as in the case of glacial-interglacial cycles triggered by perturbations in Earth's orbit, or the catastrophic extinction of dinosaurs due to a meteor impact).<sup>65</sup> The (fetishized) "invisible hand" and the (fetishized) "Anthropocene" are two faces of the same coin, of the same unconscious socialization, and should both be overcome with the communalization of social activity, that is, the real control of planetary material cycles depends on conscious social control of world production.

It should be emphasized that what is here criticized as "fetishism" is not merely the imprecise naming of the "Anthropocene," but the form of material interchange itself. And yet what emerges here is a truly utopian perspective, the promise of the realization of the Anthropocene, not as an anthropological constant or a "natural" force, but as a fully historical species-being that consciously controls and gives form to the material conditions of the planet. If, as put by the young Marx, alienated labor alienates Man's *species-being*, the liberatory reorganization of social-material interchange would unleash the species potential that is embedded, though socially negated, in the "*Anthropocene*."<sup>66</sup> Geoengineering and advanced technology in general freed from value-form and instrumental reason could be used not only to solve the climate problem, but also, as Adorno wrote, to "help nature to open its eyes," to help it "on the poor earth to become what perhaps it would like to be."<sup>67</sup> Advanced forces of production imply that Fourier's poetic utopian vision recalled by Walter Benjamin could be materialized:

cooperative labor would increase efficiency to such an extent that four moons would illuminate the sky at night, the polar ice caps would recede, seawater would no longer taste salty, and beasts of prey would do man's bidding. All this illustrates a kind of labor which, far from exploiting nature, would help her give birth to the creations that lie dormant in her womb.<sup>68</sup>

Even the elimination of brutality in nature (predation) and the abolition of slaughterhouses through the production of synthetic meat nowadays seem within theoretical reach with "genetic reprogramming" and stem-cell technology. That goes beyond the wildest Marcusean utopian dreams.<sup>69</sup> Of course, this requires a social struggle that subverts the production determined by the valorization of value and frees, first of all, human potential. On the other hand, with business as usual, we are likely to see our material future on Earth being determined by the interest rate, emergency geoengineering, and chance.

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## Narrating the Financialized Landscape: The Novels of Taylor Brady

Rob Halpern

### Introduction: Suburban Holes, or Finance & Ruin

Taylor Brady's two novels, *Microclimates* and *Occupational Treatment*, are hybrid works of hypertrophic narration cross-hatched with passages of lyric verse, at once full-throated and broken.<sup>1</sup> Situated in relation to the built environment of South Florida whose cycles of financialization could be felt long before the subprime collapse of 2007, the novels perform self-consciously in the manner of a *Bildungsroman* as they recount the constitution of their narrator's subjectivity, "an inevitable history poised to birth a subject," like an inverted ouroboros delivering its own head.<sup>2</sup> Emerging as a bastard child of Language Writing's critique of narrative (Lyn Hejinian's *My Life*) and New Narrative's embrace of storytelling (Robert Glück's *Jack the Modernist*), Brady's novels pursue a rigorous critique of subjective plenitude without disowning the excesses of narrative in a critical effort to grasp, in the words of the narrator, "my full relation to my time."<sup>3</sup> Drawing on poet's theatre and critical theory, economic analysis and procedural constraint, cartographic plotting and musicological echolocation, the work's conceptual, thematic, and formal horizons are dynamic, and they traverse resources as varied as the socio-aesthetics of Sun Ra's Afrofuturism and Rosa Luxemburg's analyses of crisis and accumulation, among a thick reservoir of cultural allusion. Most significant here is the way both *Microclimates* and *Occupational Treatment* find a model in the maximalist prose of Marcel Proust to whose sentences, in the Kilmartin and Moncrieff translation of the first two volumes of *In Search of Lost Time*, Brady apprentices himself often with remarkable fidelity. Indeed, one question that will orient my reading of the novels concerns the enriched semantic resonance of "lost time" in an era of financialization beginning in the mid-1970s whose mystifications can be characterized by "the deferred temporality of financial speculation," when buying power in the present becomes increasingly drawn "from the profits of future labor," to borrow Annie McClanahan's phrasing in "Investing in

the Future: Late Capitalism's End of History."<sup>4</sup> This is a period when the stretches of suburban development that occupy the ambient surround of Brady's novels seem to fulfill Robert Smithson's prescient predication of "ruins in reverse" in his "Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey." Alluding to "all the new construction that would eventually be built" throughout the suburban expanse of Passaic, New Jersey in 1967, and with an acute sensitivity to temporal contradiction, Smithson writes, "This is the opposite of the 'romantic ruin' because the buildings don't *fall* into ruin *after* they are built but rather *rise* into ruin before they are built."<sup>5</sup> For Smithson, this "ruin" has an aura of something eternal about it — "a clumsy eternity," he calls it — as if he were already able to sense how the present had been, or would become, subsumed by a deferred crisis lurking in the wings, "a present already abandoned" to a state of emergency as tomorrow becomes nothing more than an extension of today.<sup>6</sup>

This allusion to Smithson's "Tour of the Monuments of Passaic" isn't gratuitous. To the contrary, Smithson's narration of his adventurous day exploring the Passaic suburbs constructs an allegorical figure — if not an entire theory of allegory — that informs my reading of *Microclimates* and *Occupational Treatment*. "Passaic seems full of 'holes,'" Smithson writes, "and those holes in a sense are the monumental vacancies that define, without trying, the memory-traces of an abandoned set of futures."<sup>7</sup> And just a bit further on he continues, "Passaic has no center — it was instead a typical abyss or an ordinary void."<sup>8</sup> As if self-consciously echoing this dimension of Smithson's tour of Passaic, Brady's tour of the suburbs of Tampa is replete with thematic holes and formal voids, as well as its own "empty horizons of futurity."<sup>9</sup> For example, one of *Microclimates*' earliest moments offers a rich illustration of precisely this sort of disjunction:

"Teach the boy to read in reverse," Grandma Violet burst in, the bugle of her voice interrupting with a call to arms these projections of narrative time onto a wall as yet unbuilt but wholly real, "and he'll know better where you're coming from, what long-demolished drywall is still punctured by the tack that holds your overexposed yearbook pic."<sup>10</sup>

Here, the convergence of a future wall "as yet unbuilt but wholly real" and the "long-demolished drywall" upon which the narrator's photo hangs, cuts a dialectical figure of compressed time where the present's potential converges with the future's exhaustion in the figure of a single puncture. This is the time through which desire and memory float on material labor — the construction and demolition of housing — so that the seemingly insignificant hole made by that tack becomes an affective point of intensity and the figural location of the work's narration. This is one way in which Brady's novels theorize a relation to time, about which it's useful to think in terms of allegory.

For Paul de Man, allegory sustains a narrative of its own disjunction over time. More specifically, allegory maintains a “distance in relation to its own origin” and “it establishes its language in the void of this temporal difference.”<sup>11</sup> While de Man never pressed his theory of allegory into the critical practice of historical materialism, Walter Benjamin, to whom de Man is indebted, understood all too well how allegory captures the estrangement from the real social relations informing everyday life. Accordingly, for Benjamin, the commodity form itself becomes quintessentially allegorical insofar as it is the bearer of precisely such a temporal disjunction, which obtains in the congealed time of wage labor and the mystified disparity between value and price. But beyond its allegorical intimations, or perhaps extending from them, Smithson’s tropological insight into the suburban void anticipates the sort of “temporal disjunction,” a form of space-time compression whereby “what passes for a future” folds back on the present creating a fold in time whose figuration is a characteristic feature of the discourse of financialization.<sup>12</sup> In *How Credit-Money Shapes the Economy: The United States in a Global System*, for example, Robert Guttman underscores “the real temporal disjuncture between intention, production, and consumption,” while Leigh Claire La Berge, in her essay “The Rules of Abstraction: Methods and Discourses of Finance,” analyzes how the “real” experience of such disjunctions — perceptually and phenomenologically — is often discursively represented as being “abstract.”<sup>13</sup> La Berge begins by pointing to the way financial instruments “transform future value into present payment streams.” From the most banal (the credit card) to the more sophisticated (the derivative contract), she writes that such instruments “participate in this temporal displacement and recuperation, and they all are mediated by an expectation of future payment and future profit.”<sup>14</sup> Following La Berge’s analysis, one question that will occupy my reading of Brady’s novels concerns the way literary form — itself a kind of allegory — might be said to materialize those so-called “abstractions” at whose proverbial heart one can sense such disjunctions.<sup>15</sup>

While owing a large debt to Fredric Jameson’s theorization of literary form as allegorical of an always-historically specific “political unconscious” whose impress a novel might bear, my approach here will diverge. With respect to Brady’s writing, I’ll be less interested in form as an archeological artifact of the social processes it unwittingly registers than I will be in how an intentionally “experimental” novel can become an active agent that willfully concretizes the stuff of historical consciousness — “something prehensile in the air whose form is ownership.”<sup>16</sup> Unlike its canonical homologues, experimental writing offers a range of objects whose role exceeds that of representing what we know and in fact participates in the work of making those social processes cognizable. More specifically, I’m interested in showing how Brady’s fictions subjectivize otherwise obscure spatial displacements and temporal disjunctions, and how in doing so they arouse the aesthetic as a critical mode of self-conscious mediation between objective force and subjective experience. Thus the narrator’s

“full relation to my time” becomes cognizable through a specific form of literary expression, as both *Microclimates* and *Occupational Treatment* lend “concrete” shape to seemingly “abstract” socioeconomic processes. Moreover, it’s in the performance of becoming subjective — locally situated, embodied, and voiced — that the financialization of the built environment becomes available for narrator, writer, and reader alike. This is how I want to think about the novels as being theoreticians in their very praxis — to borrow a formulation from Marx’s early manuscripts — like sensory organs feeling, metabolizing, and ultimately concretizing something “whose form is ownership” in the spatiality of their architectures and the temporality of their sentences, thereby allowing us, in La Berge’s terms, “to deploy the language of abstract and concrete together,” while recognizing how “we ourselves are the subjects who do the concretizing.”<sup>17</sup>

Insofar as “financialization” assumes both abstract and concrete significations in La Berge’s analysis, a dialectical convergence of predicates that can be felt as “something prehensile in the air” in Brady’s novels, I want to pause to reflect on my use of this term — “financialization” — if only to preempt in advance the easy move that unwittingly collapses a concatenated set of related though disparate processes into a single concept prone to becoming a fetish or a metaphor, while still recognizing that such a concept may be necessary to enable any analysis of those processes. First, I want to distance my critical approach to Brady’s novels from a discourse of finance that reduces those processes to the merely semiotic, linguistic, or performative. While language has no doubt been profoundly affected by a range of epiphenomena mediated by forms of capital accumulation that go under the sign of “finance,” and while I do believe that experimental literary forms of poetry and prose are well-attuned to respond to its crises, it would be naive to argue as Franco Berardi does in *The Uprising: On Poetry and Finance* that “only an act of language escaping the technical automatisms of financial capitalism will make possible the emergence of a new life form.”<sup>18</sup> The late nineteenth century offers plenty of evidence as to how a profit-driven print culture governed by the mass daily newspaper — and whose full-blown dominance accompanied the rise of new financial instruments under the Second Empire in France — aroused a range of counter-discursive practices, many of them literary, whose symbolic logic, one seemingly shared by Berardi, arguably exhausted itself by the turn of the century in the work of Mallarmé and Valéry.<sup>19</sup> This doesn’t, however, exhaust the question of literature’s use — its *function* on the one hand, and its *promise* on the other — in relation to precisely those processes whose structures, at once material and affective, literary works might allow us to cognize as if for the first time. And this is the case I wish to make for Brady’s novels.

So what does “financialization” denote? Giovanni Arrighi’s by-now-familiar argument is that “financialization” can’t refer simply and specifically to a late-twentieth-century transition within global capitalism. This is so, Arrighi explains, because periods of financial expansion cycle across the whole history of capitalism,

and they generally signal an emerging shift in the geographic locus of hegemony, a process that “always occurs when the material expansion of productive forces reaches its limit.”<sup>20</sup> As this sort of expansion asserted itself in the 1970s and 1980s, it accompanied what David Harvey refers to as “flexible accumulation,” a new form of space-time compression associated with Post-Fordist production.<sup>21</sup> In this particular instance of its appearance — arguably signaling the “autumn” of the current system — financialization is “characterized by the emergence of entirely new sectors of production, new ways of providing financial services, new markets, and, above all, greatly intensified rates of commercial technologies and organizational innovation.”<sup>22</sup> According to Harvey, all this is developed inseparably with “the complete reorganization of the global financial system...the formation of a global stock market, of global commodity (even debt) futures markets, of currency and interest rate swaps, together with an accelerated geographical mobility of funds.”<sup>23</sup> While precipitating a total breakdown in boundaries between personal savings and consumer credit on one hand, and financial speculation on the other, Harvey goes on to refer to contemporary finance as “discounting time future into time present in baffling ways,” and he quotes the *Financial Times* saying as much: “Banking is quickly becoming indifferent to the constraints of time, place, and currency.”<sup>24</sup> Perhaps more significantly for my purposes here, La Berge emphasizes the medium of time as it is demarcated and structured by financial technologies. “What do a credit card, a derivative contract, a ten-year treasury bill, and a layaway account at JCPenney have in common?” she asks, and responds, “They all participate in this *temporal displacement* and recuperation, and they are all mediated by an expectation of future payment and future profit.”<sup>25</sup>

Elaborating further on some salient features of late-twentieth-century finance, Harvey goes on to describe the way “industrial, merchant, and landed capital become so integrated into financial operations and structures that it becomes increasingly difficult to tell where commercial and industrial interests begin and strictly financial interests end.”<sup>26</sup> I find it compelling how this lack of distinction between qualitatively different interests echoes Karl Marx’s own observation in chapter ten of *Capital*, Volume 1, “The Working Day,” that “surplus labor and necessary labor are mingled together” in the very structure of the daily wage.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, the logic of “congelation” may well be operative from Marx’s concept of “abstract labor” all the way to financialization itself. This increasing lack of differentiation under the sign of finance is what Stan Davis and Christopher Meyer refer to enthusiastically with the title of their book, *Blur* — a condition in which capital and labor seem to lose their distinction as the promise of future labor is leveraged, yielding present debt. Critical of this concept, Randy Martin writes, “The blurred self is the securitized self, one who offers shares in future earnings to investors.”<sup>28</sup> Accordingly, “financialization does not simply blur boundaries so as to create seepage; it insinuates an orientation toward accounting and risk management into all domains of life.”<sup>29</sup>



In both *Microclimates* and *Occupational Treatment*, whatever it is we might call financialization materializes in relation to the built environment in South Florida during the early to mid-Eighties when land speculation and real estate development get sutured to the ballooning of finance capital. In a particularly salient passage toward the conclusion of *Occupational Treatment*, Brady captures precisely this convergence:

but the tempo of walking is at no point exactly equal to the tempo of value, the less so as the landscape itself grows more and more saturated with capital and begins to pass through circuits that overlap but do not coincide with our own.<sup>30</sup>

So while capital passes through “circuits that overlap but do not coincide with our own,” it saturates not only the self, as Martin argues, but also the landscape in the form of ground rent, infrastructure, and housing development. Especially with respect to South Florida, the link between ground rent and finance is nothing new to the current spate of crises. Indeed, as Robin Blackburn notes, Florida has been referred to as the epicenter of more than one collapse of speculative financial instruments based on property mortgages. Recalling Joseph Schumpeter’s *Business Cycles* (1939), Blackburn explains how, during the 1929 Great Crash, “the tumbling property prices in Florida precipitated the collapse of a speculative bubble centered on property bonds.” Moreover, he continues, “This time around [referring to the most recent subprime crisis] speculative financial instruments based on property mortgages have also collapsed — with Florida again an epicenter.”<sup>31</sup> As its own form of enclosure — which most simply denotes the organization of private property and capital — finance maintains a residual tie, if not a living connection, to land enclosures and the accumulation by dispossession that those enclosures continue to generate, a dispossession, as historian Peter Linebaugh notes, “inseparable from terror and the destruction of independence and community.”<sup>32</sup> Presciently anticipating the recent crisis — and channeling Blackburn’s remarks *avant la lettre*, Brady’s novelistic imagination senses and makes perceptible these inseparable links between the history of enclosures, city development, and contemporary finance. As the novels track “the course of our migration across the plains of redevelopment,” the writing self-consciously thematizes its own haunting awareness of enclosure. For example, the narration of a walk across those “plains of redevelopment” in *Occupational Treatment* yields “discrete and bounded units that constituted place by shifting uncontrollably through space” as well as “a horizon which neither approached nor receded but maintained about us an enclosure, proving once and for all that the denuded landscape was fully and expensively dressed.”<sup>33</sup> And in *Microclimates*, the “terror” of such enclosures in the South Florida landscape manifests as nothing less than race-based and class-based state violence:



against a landscape whose every feature was marked with terror — people could show you, for example, the oak tree whose largest limb had been part of the apparatus of the county's last acknowledged lynching, only some ten years past, or the wall stained slightly down near the ground where the color of bricks went from red to brown, against which skinheads had broken open a kid's head after a concert the summer before, or the interstate overpass, whose protective cover had become a permanent neighborhood everyone pointedly refused to acknowledge on their way to work — this turns out to be the most stupidly subjective detour of all.<sup>34</sup>

The fullness of Brady's narrator's "relation to my time" is mediated by these "stupidly subjective detours" as their circuitous routes through landscapes at once exterior and interior enact the fullness of that relation. At one moment early in *Microclimates*, Brady stages this as a relation to historical ruin in a passage that reenacts Walter Benjamin's "angel of history" caught in "a storm blowing from paradise...irresistibly propelling him toward the future toward which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward."<sup>35</sup> In Brady's passage, the narrator imagines himself caught in a wind with his own "outstretched and non-angelic fingers still rigid now ten years along with that inaugural red-faced squall."<sup>36</sup> As he's "blown backward towards that future by a hot wind from heaven, or if not heaven at least the not-yet-defunct port just past downtown," Brady's paragraph itself swells with the goods associated with the ongoing catastrophe of global trade, from the finished "discount sneakers, alphabet flashcards, and plastic dolls" to "phosphates, thick transparent plastics used to make cheap lenses and the wage-labor for which in some sooner future a vaguely-named later 'we' would inhabit the command to learn to be grateful in retrospect as if for the temperate bounty of the Gulf of Mexico itself."<sup>37</sup> Benjamin's aphoristic allusion to "one single catastrophe" whose singularity manifests in the visual image of "piling wreckage upon wreckage" becomes in Brady's treatment the appearance of an immense collection of commodities to which the otherwise occulted presence of wage-labor — arguably the withdrawn cause of catastrophe — is returned.<sup>38</sup> The inclusion of wage-labor among a paradigmatic list of things accumulating like so much dead debris around the port is significant not only for what it contributes to the passage's power of analysis, but for what this description contributes to an understanding of the lived experience of temporal disjunction wherein a collective subject responsive to a certain "command" to be grateful finds its location "in some sooner future" asynchronously disconnected with its own "later we." The torqued syntax of this figure bears the impress of a certain temporal compression that has lost the compass of its own "common places," the *topoi koinoi* Aristotle refers to as those rhetorical expressions that lend themselves to any situation and upon which so-called common sense depends. In his *Grammar of the Multitude*, Paolo Virno elaborates on Aristotle's idea of the common places as "the most generally valid logical and

linguistic forms of all our discourse,” for example, the opposition of opposites: more and less, up and down, sooner and later.<sup>39</sup> In other words, the challenge to the common places of spatio-temporal orientation impacts Brady’s writing — both prosaically and prosodically — at the level of its connective tissue, its syntax, or the conventions by which common sense organizes itself linguistically.<sup>40</sup>

### The Desire for Narrative

Poised on the edge of an era defined by consumer credit defaults and collateralized debt obligations, when future earnings are already underwriting the present, Brady’s novels anatomize the “structures of feeling” and affective epiphenomena — the histories of particular bodies and selves — that accompany or resist the damage of crisis. In doing so, the prose of both *Microclimates* and *Occupational Treatment* makes the logic of intractable economic force legible, as Brady himself notes in “Narrative Occupation and Uneven Enclosure”: “part of the desire for narrative is the desire to produce precisely such an intelligible account.”<sup>41</sup> Most significant, however, are the effects on a novel’s form when that desire exceeds what can in fact be rendered intelligible as narrative, or when the very material of narrative — as well as the temporal medium through which it moves — resists its own intelligibility. As Brady formulates it: “narrative fundamentally has to miss something of historical experience in order to render it narratable at all.”<sup>42</sup> Indeed, as the novels aim to feel “the full relation to my time,” a relation inseparable from the local processes and global crises whose displacements make the narrating subject what it is, they can only strain the logic of narrativity, a logic that always involves a tension between the two axes of composition — the spatial axis of equivalence with its vertical pull toward dilation and the temporal axis of combination with its horizontal pull toward termination — while maintaining as its limit the wholesale displacement of the one onto the other, which in Roman Jakobson’s formulation constitutes the “poetic function,” and whereby narrativity would be minimized.<sup>43</sup>

In so far as these processes and crises test the limits of narrative possibility itself, Brady’s novelistic form approaches that of non-narrative as the writing locates itself within a concatenated set of the often-illegible dynamics productive of capital’s accumulated dead labor, its concentration and trickle-down through South Florida’s suburban development tracts, its flows, blockages, and waste-producing apparatuses. With respect to non-narrative, Carla Harryman offers this useful précis in her introduction to a special feature of the *Journal of Narrative Theory* devoted to “Non/Narrative”:

The theoretical work of the socially engaged non/narrative text stems from its production of a crisis of understanding. Works that shift between genres disturb categorical frames, foregrounding language such that narrative seems to disappear. They radically break rules of story-telling to

stage a necessary disruption of asymmetrical power relations, the limits of knowledge, psychological, and social operations of recognition and misrecognition, the complex connections between private experience and larger social forces, and the cooperative construction of meaning. The radical formalism identified with nonnarrative is thus not a “mere formalism” within the sphere of the politically and aesthetically radical work. It is a strategy of intervention.<sup>44</sup>

What Harryman refers to as a crisis of understanding might also be thought of as a crisis of representation wherein the relation between subjective perception and objective force becomes radically disjoined as the historical specificity of any socioeconomic event belies its overdetermination by a plurality of forces. And while narrative can never capture the fullness of such an event, it can make the expansive feeling of that fullness perceptible, if only in its negative outline, by performing a relation to its own receding horizon, enacting a dialectic of narrative and non-narrative characteristic of Brady’s novels as they leaven with that feeling.

With the sort of experimental precision one might otherwise attribute to the very forces the novels witness, Brady’s narrative desires to feel the shape of its own time by throwing the narrator’s past into relief against the ground of the present, which itself can’t be felt except insofar as it emerges against the ground of that past. First, there is the time of the narrator’s childhood and adolescence during a transitional period of capital accumulation arguably inaugurated in 1973 with the abandonment of the gold standard. Drawing on the work of Robert Brenner, Giovanni Arrighi, and Ernest Mandel, Joshua Clover offers this succinct précis of the period in his essay “*Retcon: Value and Temporality in Poetics*” (about which I will have more to say in what follows):

The annus horribilis of 1973 is identified in the United States especially with the end of the Long Boom following World War II; the first in a series of massive “oil shocks”; the final collapse of the Bretton Woods agreements setting the stage for increasing global trade and current account imbalances; the secular decline in industrial profitability and the departure from the Fordist mode of production; and, as consequence of these factors and more, the shift from industrial to finance capital as the center of gravity for the United States-centered regime of accumulation.<sup>45</sup>

Brady himself draws attention to this historical periodization in “Narrative Occupation and Uneven Enclosure” when he writes,

My own recent narrative writing has attempted to articulate the various scales of experience in a working-class Florida suburban adolescence

in the late seventies and early eighties. As it happens, this experience coincides with a period in which the rolling wave of accumulation crises dating, for the sake of convenience, to 1974 begin to exert an exaggerated pressure on real estate, and the intensification of relations between social landscape and speculative capital becomes, for a certain class and region, a matter of direct experience. In my novel *Occupational Treatment*, this process culminates logically, and originates experientially, with a series of police raids on escheat zoning plats on the exurban fringe, which have until now been squatted by homeless families and used for various illicit pleasures and conflicts by young people housed in the surrounding low-rent neighborhoods.<sup>46</sup>

“A matter of direct experience,” but of what? Perhaps of nothing more than the structures that mediate our experience. Just as “contact with the land” once connoted a more immediate experience of nature, one whose directness has seemingly eroded with modernization, the idea of making direct contact with the financialized landscape of monetized plots — like “a hand trailing absently along a blond cinderblock wall” — can still connote immediate contact with “universal experience” under contemporary conditions, only this is an experience — and a nature — entirely mediated by capital.<sup>47</sup> Often, however, Brady’s narrative will perform this sense of direct experience by way of more extravagant juxtapositions, “as if it were my existence in someone else’s mind, were it laid out as fine tissue from power plant to port to culvert to kumquat tree, and threaded through the chain-link in every kind of knot, would have been the membrane around the balloon payment, the final installment on the property.”<sup>48</sup> Thus does the South Floridian “vista full of property” manifest in both novels as “an excess of vacancy”: the plenitude of a void heavy with the body as it gets contracted by the logic and structure of state violence, identity, and ownership.<sup>49</sup>

“Plot structure” means everything here, and it contains a residue of a so-called “universal experience” once associated with traditional storytelling. While de-emphasizing a generic fidelity to narrative plot, Brady’s writing deftly makes use of character and story; but whatever we might call “plot structure” in Brady’s novels appears as an effect of the irreconcilable temporalities that the writing formally negotiates: the phenomenological time of the body, for example, and the economic time of the market. With respect to the idea of “plot” as it might be heard as a homonymic pun, however, *Microclimates* and *Occupational Treatment* remain remarkably faithful as they map the subject’s relation to the social economy of unevenly developed plots — grids of cartographic measure, real estate, and ground rent, whose “plots” the novels regularly thematize in the form of strip malls, tract homes, vanished woods, as well as stories — all of which shape our experience of time, while harboring time’s socio-material substrate in exploitative structures like wage labor and credit debt. Thus, the novels arouse the tension between seemingly disparate structures of economic

force and experiential time as if this tension were its specific material.

Brady elaborates on these stakes while ramifying their implications in “Narrative Occupation and Uneven Enclosure,” in passages that also appear, slightly altered, in the pages of *Occupational Treatment*:

There are gaps in every world we build that substantialize our sense of time, so that the derealized features of a beloved character who died in a cruel afterthought cohere as a solid block like the hulk of a demolished television set whose vacuum, uncontained, becomes the exact shape of what must have happened to place us here precisely by subtracting itself from us in order to become a landscape across which we could imagine the drift of a merry band of saboteurs, terrorists, and intellectuals through our scenario which aimed, not at recovering the catastrophic occupation and fire, but at tracing precisely the tempo of an experience that missed it so as to address us as those who shall have come to be.<sup>50</sup>

Like the tempo of walking and the tempo of value, the tempo of individual experience fails to coincide with the time of crisis against which it is set, and it is this gap in the world we’ve built that generates the tension we associate with narrative. Brady is quite up-front about this theorization of narrative in his writing. “I suppose this brings me to my minimum definition of what such a narrative might be,” he writes and immediately continues:

a verbal sequence whose temporality is placed in relation to the time-scale of some other sequence (of unseen events that structure the experience of a vanished plot of woods, for example), such that this relation is a problem, a rhythmic wheezing between metal scaffolding and dead signals in which there must be some sense of proportion. Of course, as persistent as the problem itself are the evasive protocols for shunting it into a premature resolution, or sidestepping it altogether, as one allows the deafening noise of the helicopter blades to fade back into the encompassing buzz of mosquitoes and that into the vague sticky pause in which one remembers the texture of summer as if through a coarse aluminum screen.<sup>51</sup>

This tension between what Brady refers to later in the same passage as “combative temporalities” has implications for an understanding of narrative form, and it realizes itself in the structure of Brady’s novelistic prose where the verbal sequencing that constitutes one’s narration of a personal history — memory, interlocution, analysis, recollection — is pressured by the more elusive temporality of “landscapes and built environments,” the terra firma of capital investment against which those verbal

sequences become audible as sound figures.<sup>52</sup> “What I’m reaching for,” he goes on to write, “is a disposition of narrative that addresses this experience riven between two or more time-space scales, in the sense of knowing that to elaborate a track across a landscape is ultimately to impoverish or underdevelop some constituent of the vectoral multiplicity of possible developments it initially poses.”<sup>53</sup> Whereas realist fiction takes its “landscapes and environment as accomplished facts (i.e., with a view of history that irons out contradiction),” Brady’s approach to narrative aims to arouse the material of all those flattened contradictions, “to mark the tempo of the administered relation to place,” while self-reflexively acknowledging in itself a residue of “those strategies for make-believing away the divergence between the narrative of place and its historical occupation.”<sup>54</sup>

Brady refers to this temporal dissonance as a kind of perennial “stutter” — not at all a gratuitous metaphor — whereby one’s utterance, at the level of its very embodiment, registers a “fault” that makes a dissonant relation palpable at the level of physical sensation itself, as the spatial axis of verbal selection fails to coincide with the temporal axis of its own sequencing. “Stuttering in this case would be the constant catching-up this stance necessitates, as the administrative consciousness is always having to adjust, like a bad dancer, to a reality that has shifted subtly away from it, even as its gesture is in part an attempt to efface its own recognition of that shift.”<sup>55</sup> This becoming-perceptible of otherwise unseen structures works like a phenomenology of natural history set against a backdrop of capital’s laundering machines, where the signs of force are impressed into the lived environment, then washed away or bleached. Brady’s narrative presences the invisibility of capital’s structural violence — “the displaced violence of foundation” — a violence that shapes our field of vision, so that “to see” the developed landscape in South Florida is to feel the effects of incoherent sites and the strain of seeing that incoherence coherently.<sup>56</sup> In this way, the novels themselves become kin to what Robert Smithson calls *nonsites* whereby submerged processes and dynamics become visible as if for the first time.<sup>57</sup> In short, the novels’ narrative preoccupations make the terms of a constitutive violence perceptible, even as that violence recedes, not into the historical horizon of visibility, but into an unspeakable zone of embodied life whose kernel contains “the sumptuous stuffs of our ability to recognize a common history in this place,” an ability to recognize and speak a common history that has become disabled, not by way of either prohibition or taboo, but as an effect of positive convention, the most banal and everyday.<sup>58</sup>

### Catastrophe and Structure

In the blurb that I wrote for the back cover of *Microclimates*, I referred to the novel as “an awesome construction committed to producing the vanishing moments of its own historical truth.” I wrote this while thinking about how the book materializes a negative imprint of a withdrawn catastrophe that challenges the very possibility of



narrative and around whose damaging effects the book organizes a vast architectural form. The first page of *Microclimates*, for example, presents a facsimile of a handwritten poem and this is captioned by a footnote attributed to the work's fictitious editors: "[Eds.] In the manuscript this space was occupied by a Polaroid photograph set between corners....Unfortunately, severe water damage — perhaps inflicted by the events narrated in pp. 63-73 — has rendered the photograph unrecognizable."<sup>59</sup> But the catastrophic cause of the work's damage remains at the limit of what the work itself can represent, so that when the reader turns to the noted pages — which of course one wants to do immediately in search of some narrative explanation for the effect that has already captured one's attention — they discover that these pages don't exist. Instead, one finds an inexplicable insertion of pages 235 to 245 where pages sixty-three to seventy-three ought to be, a mysteriously displaced supplement to this novel of 164 pages, and no mention of a flood. *Microclimates* goes on to assume a shape around this hole, which situates the work on the edge of its own narration, a threshold where the book becomes *ek-static* and fails to coincide with itself, turning on the axis of its dislocation. Thus the novel bears the impress of an occulted violence that shapes its local specificity, producing a material record of its own history together with an absence of any real evidence.

*Occupational Treatment* only deepens *Microclimates'* constructions as it finds its form around a series of blanks and voids, silences and vacancies, dead spots and holes, placeholders and apostrophes all of which mark a perennial crisis, leaving the figural stains of trauma everywhere unavailable for straight representation. For example, the novel opens with the line: "Here is the catalogue of the construction disasters I promised," a catalogue that later arrives at the boundary of the self's own narratability with a series of blank film stills in the novel's central section, "Production Notes for Occupation," where the writing works, in its own words, to recover from oblivion some "invisible event obscene relation," an event whose indeterminacy hangs on its being both psychosexual or socioeconomic, "an event whose exclusion from our experience first set in motion the series of forced equivalents by which we have staked out this miniature horizon."<sup>60</sup> In so far as it attempts to narrate the narrator's own formation as a subject, *Occupational Treatment* occupies the space of irrecoverable loss and foreclosed possibility, while locating itself in relation to capitalism's endless depredations and military occupations.

Within the shared framework of both novels, socio-aesthetic problems can be thought of in terms of time and vision as the writing shows our situation to be one in which the light that we depend on in order to see the world turns out to be the residual glare emitted by all our apparatuses of social production: military, industrial, sexual, urban, environmental, like the "night gases rising brightly from the bay," with which *Occupational Treatment* comes to a close.<sup>61</sup> This underscores the aporia of vision wherein the writing situates itself. Here, "the sun has risen. And is false. Layer after unbearably bright layer. This is the opacity of light in the barrens of



architecture.”<sup>62</sup> Melissa Dyne’s cover image for *Occupational Treatment* illustrates this idea exquisitely: the scene is one of a dark room in which the only light is the light emitted by a *camera obscura* projecting an inverted image of a desert motel and a pool on a blank wall. Karl Marx draws on the image produced by the *camera obscura* in his effort to describe the inversions in perception and cognition that structure ideological consciousness, and the rigor of Brady’s writing amounts to a counter-force commensurate to that structure. But this is a counter-force that refuses the consoling illusion that the ideological image can be simply overturned or corrected. By contrast, Brady’s work is painfully aware that it is the image-apparatus itself that generates the light enabling our vision in the first place.

As I pondered what this revelation might mean for the course of our migration across the plains of redevelopment, residual brightness continued to dazzle, in decorative shards that ate into the structure they purported to reveal, the picture I was beginning to reassemble of my location in the world, and for the second time in my life I was graced with a vision of dancers just behind the level blank of visibility...<sup>63</sup>

Like the underdeveloped tract of suburban landscape, this blank is never neutral. Rather, it’s saturated with uneven relations of power so refined and thinned as to admit the illusion of its own transparency, except at those places of bodily contact where power thickens: for example, “I had so much skin, collapsing on me like an abandoned lean-to.”<sup>64</sup> This one extravagant simile offers a point of departure whereby Brady is able to create, through a series of substitutions or “forced equivalents,” an image of direct bodily contact with the stuff of suburban development: money and matter. Thus the passage moves from “so much skin” to “an abandoned lean-to” to “translucent drapery” to “fine tissue” only to resolve itself in “a membrane around the balloon payment” and “a tarp on that scale, stretched over the building materials.”<sup>65</sup>

But this is only one of Brady’s compositional strategies. More specifically with respect to discursive structure, I want to quote Brady at some length here:

The bare chronicle of events gets at some of this, but I wonder about its obsessive worrying at the event status of state violence whose vanishing beneath the threshold of witness constitutes the perceptual field in which I have come to be conscious of any possible struggle against it, whether it creates the resonating space in which frequency spikes of allegory might break through the compression envelope, or whether it simply dissipates energy from that locale to create a dead spot, an impasse that can only give onto the cheap transcendence of an intuited “unknown world” that leads astray by a show of mere coincidences, thus bringing us full circle back to the skin movie I was trying to seduce you with,

before I realized I was seducing myself into position on the chair from which the question of impossible perspective first arose. Would it matter if I told you, for instance, that I am writing this while eavesdropping on county planning officials who are busy congratulating each other for their political maturity in grasping that the true function of land use policy is to follow along behind ‘market forces,’ or would that only become, given the contained space in which we conduct our interrogation, one more illegitimate device for amplifying the private twitching in my throat into a wall of sound that would fill in the unseemly gaps in my command of the composition’s unfolding? <sup>66</sup>

As is clear in this passage, Brady’s discursivity confounds the generic distributions of poetry, prose, and theory, as each mode of cognition participates in all the others. The writing consistently balances the paratactic sequencing of compositional units with the work of hypotactic subordination, whose excessive interpolations can barely be contained by the sentences that arouse them. These sentences often hold together by way of a barely perceptible splice or cut whose suture suggests a relation between seemingly incompatible elements — “an intuited ‘unknown world’” and a “skin movie,” for example, or “land-use policy” and “the private twitching in my throat” — whose combinatory logic hangs fire just beyond the threshold of common sense. Brady constantly elaborates on such ideas within the frame of the novels themselves, whose preoccupations with their own narrative endeavors become inseparable from the substance of the work:

The total effect is one of forward motion that continually falls back upon itself, maximal fullness of syntactical elaboration becoming an odd kind of lack, as if the world were to eject us in order to form itself in the image of our voices. <sup>67</sup>

Recalling the stutter, this auditory “image” intimates a formal allegory as it registers the breakdown of relation under a mode of production constantly reaching its own saturation. Thus, the paradigmatic (spatial) axis of selection — along which the vast array of commodities and financial instruments expands by suppressing any perception of time — fails to correspond with the syntagmatic (temporal) axis of combination, along which that same vast array is produced. In other words, spatial equivalence and temporal sequence become consequentially detached in such a way that cannot adequately account for its own “disjunction,” itself a formal figuration of crisis; and this crisis is constitutive of the so-called “narrative tension” that the novel itself can only fail to fully narrate. This particular use of spatial and temporal disjunction is just another characteristic feature of Brady’s method and it expresses

something critical about the subjective experience of value — what the ongoing crises of capital might actually *feel* like, not only in its effects (although that, too) but in its very structure — an experience at the displaced center of both *Microclimates* and *Occupational Treatment*, “the experience of a vanished plot of woods, for example.”<sup>68</sup>

While it’s not the aim of this essay to offer a summary theory of value, it is nevertheless important to stress that value, as understood within a Marxian frame, is a social relation — or a set of social relations — in constant motion. As Marx explains in *Capital*, Volume 2: “Capital, as self-valorizing value...can only be grasped as a movement and not as a static thing.”<sup>69</sup> More than a positive figure, value poses the thorniest problem of economy, involving laboring bodies, wages, and commodities within a globalized situation where the price of those commodities — including the price of labor itself — hangs in a disjointed relation not only to the socially necessary labor time necessary to produce them, but to the financialized circuits through which the signs of value travel and change at remarkable speed, further mystifying those relations. Just as price can be said to occult the ontology of value — its production, circulation, and realization — in order to represent itself, so too might Brady’s prose have “to miss something of historical experience in order to render it narratable at all.”<sup>70</sup> And what it misses may well be the economic structure of the very landscape that grounds its own experience, something like “that displaced violence of foundation” that “vanishes beneath the threshold of witness.” Put another way, in its effort to express the objective conditions that inform its own history, Brady’s writing begins to sense the shape of those relations — between labor and commodity, use and exchange, production and circulation, consumption and waste — which are never fully present in the places they appear. This idea finds a conceptual handle in Marx’s analysis of capital as the spatialization of a temporal process:

As a whole, then, capital is simultaneously present, and spatially coexistent, in its various phases. But each part is constantly passing from one phase or functional form into another, and thus functions in all of them in turn. The forms are therefore fluid forms and the terms are mediated by their succession.<sup>71</sup>

(This idea will reappear in Brady’s notion of “being in more than one ‘once’ per place,” which I’ll discuss below.)

In its fidelity to the way the terms of value are mediated under conditions of late-late capitalism, Brady’s narrative achieves a certain capacity to feel its non-synchronicity with its own conditions of possibility:

So, a going forward while knowing that one has to go back, and knowing that going back remains a kind of forward motion that will not fully recover the initial lapse, playing both sides against a middle where any

thought of territory undoes itself through the force of its own capacity to replace whatever you might have been thinking of it with a forced decision that is not unlike love, or sleep. In this sense the contradictory nature of experience is not only translated back and forth between us into sequence, but more strongly traduced, by a method which pushes its infidelities to the forefront at every opportunity, our spasms of pleasure repeatedly taking leave of each other vanishing so deeply into our interiors that we become interchangeable with the velocity of change in the neighborhood of our exchange.<sup>72</sup>

“Our exchange” is an effect of both the communication my sentence enables, and the parsing of space into plots. Similarly, narrative time can be felt as the tension between a freely floating present tense and “the occupation of this tract of land in a time before we awakened to it,” where land becomes the territory of exchangeable parcels, and time becomes “the occupations we now pursue across its surface.”<sup>73</sup> This phenomenology of time suggests the world of fiction, which for Brady is a world that has forgotten the contradictions of its own temporality even as it organizes itself around an “experience riven between two or more time scales.”<sup>74</sup> This definition of fiction is useful as it avows the material production of its own time-sense, even if the resulting narrative is unable to adequately account for it. Accordingly, the world of fiction and the world of finance bear some critical resemblance. Insofar as the time of capital accumulation is un-metaphorically the time through which narrative moves, this definition simply acknowledges what typically goes unrecognized in fiction even when fiction makes its familiar appeal to “realism,” which in its typical modes flattens the temporal contradictions constitutive of its own material. The subjective experience of this material — which may turn out to be nothing less than the social construction of time itself — is intimately related to the structure of debt, which draws for its sustenance on the future labor time of presently living bodies.

### **Time of Capital / Time of Narrative**

In his essay “Autumn of the System: Poetry and Finance Capital,” Joshua Clover examines the implications of such contradictions in an effort to promote a return to poetry — “or at least non-narrative” — for Marxian-bent literary studies interested in the relation between finance capital and literature.<sup>75</sup> In doing so, he analyzes Marx’s formula for the production of surplus capital —  $M-C-M'$  — a sequence in time whose logic of motion and change, Clover suggests, might appear to resemble that of narrative itself:

It is in this most basic of Marxian formulations (the “general formula of capital”), that one sees narrative’s most primitive relation on the logic of capitalism as opposed to other modes of production. For it is only under

capitalism that one begins with money which seeks to become more money rather than, for example, beginning with the commodities one uses in daily life and using money only to maintain a steady supply of these uses (C-M-C).<sup>76</sup>

In his critique of Fredric Jameson's proposition that capitalism is a narrative category and can thus be best grasped through narrative structures, Clover argues that the dynamic movement constitutive of value may be in excess of — or fundamentally inassimilable to — what narrative can in fact represent, especially when M-C-M' is understood not as a simple temporal sequence but rather as "expansion beyond any limit."<sup>77</sup>

Before considering this argument more specifically in relation to the difficulties posed by financialization, it's worth looking to Marx himself for a sense of how the space-time dynamics of capital's valorization and the production of surplus-value have always been much more complicated than the primary sequence M-C-M' suggests. In his discussion of "The Metamorphoses of Capital," Marx elaborates on these complications. "The independence of value," he writes,

in relation to the value-forming power, labor-power...is realized during the production process as exploitation of labor-power. But this independence does not reappear in the circuit in which money, commodity and elements of production are only alternating forms of the capital value in process.<sup>78</sup>

Here, Marx is discussing the multiple circuits through which value moves and changes. Indeed, value is constituted precisely by that movement and change. These circuits of money, labor, and other elements (machinery, raw materials, etc.) are interdependent and move simultaneously as value alternates its forms among them. This implies that every analytic representation of capital can only be factitious, for in arresting any one moment in the process — any one appearance of independent value — one must miss other moments constitutively integral to the first but whose alternating forms may be spatially and temporally disjoined from it. Similarly, the realization of value, which appears independent of the process that generates it, is in fact inseparable from the exploitation of labor-power that constitutes that appearance. In short, the independence of any one moment in the process of value's valorization and realization is only an appearance, and the processual sequence may not be linear at all. And insofar as "capital is simultaneously present and spatially coexistent, in its various phases," it may resist narrative representation entirely.<sup>79</sup>

The problem only gets more complicated under conditions of increasing financialization when the appearance of that earlier resemblance — between primary sequence and narrative structure — becomes more difficult to maintain. This enhanced difficulty is due to the fact that the temporal condition of finance capital is

one in which labor time — the commodity (C) that subtends the valorization process — only *appears* to have been subtracted from the production of value. Whereas the production of surplus value is governed by the exploitation of labor — “the value of which is measured in time,” Clover notes — financialized value appears to dispense with labor altogether (M–M') as if labor were no longer necessary for the valorization process. But as Clover is quick to clarify, “the financialized formula M–M' is in fact always the formula M–M' [C]. The labor commodity is not truly routed around.”<sup>80</sup> In other words, the appearance of accumulation that we see in finance — however fictitious the value associated with that accumulation might be — cannot occur without labor. The catch, however, is that the labor time upon which buying power in the present depends is “the labor time always to come.”<sup>81</sup> “In so far as the time of the future arrives in the present,” Clover writes, “it is processed into its role in the order of current capital relations, taking the place of a largely foreclosed spatial expansion. Time is colonized as if it were space.”<sup>82</sup> This temporal contradiction — this fold in time whereby the labor needed to materially substantiate the valorization of capital in the present cannot have taken place — can't be dissociated from the time of crisis and might even constitute its ontology.

I've chosen to tarry with Clover's analysis because I believe that it stimulates new critical energies in the interest of addressing contemporary literature under current financialized conditions while moving beyond the Jamesonian default to narrative. Indeed, Clover aims to rehabilitate *poetry* — “or at least non-narrative” — as a privileged object of critical focus insofar as it might better enable us to cognize something altogether elusive about contemporary experience — say, “my full relation to my time” — something normative narrative is unable to accommodate, let alone represent.<sup>83</sup> It's the caveat — “at least non-narrative” — that I want to underscore and pressure here in the interest of opening the tension between narrative and non-narrative, an opening Brady's handling of narrativity facilitates as it exploits the formal tension between its temporal and spatial axes, negotiating its own poetic function while approaching a limit “in what must have happened to place us here precisely by subtracting itself from us in order to become a landscape.”<sup>84</sup> Moreover, as labor-time becomes difficult to account for under the temporality of finance, the appearance of a coherent narrative syntax, one capable of representing the time through which any story moves, becomes difficult to maintain. Hence the appearance of holes in the present that have something fundamental to do with the social material of time and which Brady's narratives attempt to locate, embody, and substantialize, rendering the moment's contradictions in such a way that they might become available to sense and cognition, while foregrounding the strain on normative narrative structures to make the logic of financialized time available for apprehension. The stakes of the work may be the feeling of that limit — something missing from the present while simultaneously underwriting it — whose arousal allows something otherwise elusive to become available to experience.



### The Time of the Sentence

Just what kind of sentence enables one to feel that limit? What kind of sentence can apprehend its own inadequacy when sensing something ungraspable within its own experience? This recalls Brady's use of Proust, whose sentences offer him an unworkable model. "This work," he writes,

exploits the capacity of English syntax to become lost or confused after a certain quantitative length is reached. Lack of declension allows sentences of an arbitrarily long extension to "forget themselves," so that even in a sentence where later parsing reveals a normative construction, the reader experiences modifiers sliding away from nouns and verbs, multiply embedded subordinate clauses breaking their subordination to the main clause.<sup>85</sup>

This has everything to do with syntax, or the conventions governing the sequencing of linguistic units as they organize themselves in relation to a terminal period, at once deferred and anticipated. Brady's sentential syntax is constantly in the process of trying to stabilize its meaning from a horizon that can never quite be seen but can be tensely felt through a disorienting thicket of conjunction and subordination, a whole labyrinth of clauses. As the sentence approaches its limit, the volatility of its syntax becomes amplified, as if the sentence itself could feel the imminence of a terminal moment when the fiction of its own fixed relations can only belie its appearance of stability.<sup>86</sup> Syntax thus becomes a kind of social material, at once resistant and pliable, by which the writing recursively enacts a relation to relation itself, even as the very terms of relation, terms that the sentence longs indefatigably to feel, have been withdrawn into a structure of effects without a narratable cause.<sup>87</sup>

But even this precision fails to account for the production notes secreted by the scenario, not as its interior, as in the familiar trope of the film within a film, but as its necessary and missing anterior, a place prior to the tempo of non-occurrence where the problem of missing time resolves into a paradox of space through the essential technique of an absent social mass for being in more than one 'once' per place, so that packets of life in excess of this body spread through our script and the scene of circular relation into which it calls us, making the question not the easy one of a founding absence, but the irrational numerical expression of our own reflections distributed among all the objects and territories we survey in the form of their non-reflective obverse, in which even the pain of a prior disappearance cannot stabilize around those whose dead labor or labor of dying our situation here assumed for *there is now the possibility of meeting*

*them again later on; they have ceased merely to be silhouetted against a horizon where we had been ready to suppose that we should never see them reappear.*<sup>88</sup>

This sentence is exemplary not only for its form but for its thematization of its formal problem. Here, the displacement associated with the temporality of finance capital becomes legible as “the problem of missing time,” a problem whose tensions and contradictions can’t be contained by the familiar phrase according to which one might be in two places at once. Instead, the sentence transfigures the spatial paradox through semantic stress and syntactic torque to one of “being in more than one ‘once’ per place.” Brady’s turn of phrase estranges the cliché while enabling us to think about the phenomenon whereby a seeming absence — let’s say, of laboring bodies — becomes an uncontainable excess of effects “distributed among all the objects and territories we survey,” like an immense accumulation of commodities that spatializes the time of production, just as it temporalizes the space of relation. More than just the same fragment of labor time appearing simultaneously in multiple iterations at any one place, however, Brady’s figure complicates the idea even further as it imagines an “absent social mass,” like abstract labor power itself, whose socialization is only accessible in its numerical effects, turning “a founding absence” into an “irrational numerical expression of our own reflections,” while placing “ourselves” in relation with “the dead labor or labor dying our situation here assumed.” Even “the pain of prior disappearance” — the “missing time” of living labor — manifests in the present as the most unstable relation with “our situation.”

All this suggests the temporality of crisis whereby the present tense is suspended between “a place prior to the tempo of non-occurrence” — arguably a site of “accumulation by dispossession” that is foundational to, but missing from, capitalism’s empty time, what Brady refers to later in the passage as “our empty horizons of futurity” — and the future labor time contracted to the present like an infinite resource, a future into which we are at every moment “going forward while knowing that one has to go back, and knowing that going back remains a kind of forward motion that will not recover the initial lapse.”<sup>89</sup> This movement suggests the temporal structure of monetary debt, “the scene of circular relation into which we are called,” while also recalling an even more “prior” moment of dispossession: “Remember the school tour of the mid-state plantation,” the narrator continues later in the same passage, “how it explained in minute detail the domestic economies of timber harvest, stock raising, and corn cultivation, leaving out only the fact that all this production was carried out by slave labor.”<sup>90</sup> This is how the temporal disjunction associated with the time of finance harbors nothing less than displaced violence, as the narrator notes at the conclusion of the same passage:

What I mean, I think, is that no matter the critical eye with which we return to that day’s instructions, we must at least suspect that the

ideological distortion remains a more primary moment, linked as it was with an ensemble of panic, physical pain, and the free-floating sense that the surrounding adults were liars as often as not, so that not the revelation of the lie but the swelling of anticipation pointing to the place where it *would have come to be revealed* was molded into the flesh itself, and a series of broken gestures in the knives, guns, and bombs of such displaced violences is what has mounded up the dirt to make a seat for our simple facing off against each other in this clearing, a simplicity that must have cost a fortune.<sup>91</sup>

Brady's syntactically labile sentences measure its meanings in relation to an extratextual whole — a structure in excess of its effects — that exceeds any one sentence's reach and to which not even the novel's completed construction can adequately refer. At the same time, the whole to which the sentence accedes remains immanent to each unit's syntactical strain, weighing on the grammatical subject. Sentences thus generate an intense and tortuous pressure, whose gestural dimension translates tonally and critically in registers of affect, as if the sentence itself were suffering its contortions in an effort to make legible the conditions underwriting its own grammar, a kind of "financial grammar" governing our relations as subjects and objects by way of unseen transactions and processes. One can dip nearly anywhere in the novels to locate exemplary sentences like the following from *Microclimates* which thematizes the formal concerns I've been discussing:

Was this the same sort of memory in which was grounded Birdy's automatism as he phoned in his order with Tampa's first delivery-service Szechuan restaurant, just as he phoned in so many of his performances, not wanting to leave the zone marked off by his four cinderblock walls, within which was a fairly small margin for error and stage for action in his echo-location of himself, even as this predictability and constant predication were founded on an essential dislocation, both his own and others', that allowed him nonetheless to "hold the line" for the ring of his beloved Apostrophe, an instance of that predication, unpredictable with the static-electric burst of predication itself, that motivated a "sound like" stripped of self-similarity, a conduit for which he held the negative pole of a blank and always ready likeness, waiting all the while for the positive access and excess that would startle him as looked-for but unheard-of sound?<sup>92</sup>

Rather than a melancholic attachment to lost time, which the Proustian sentence aims to recover within its own arresting spatialization of temporal movement whereby what is lost to the present becomes the pretext for the formal pleasures of seemingly

interminable dilations, Brady's sentences expand as they seek the structure of present time itself. In its effort to register the specific structure of time under intensifying processes of financialization, a structure immanent to its vast array of effects and which we are still in the process of apprehending, Brady's sentences dilate toward the horizon of a future from which the temporal resource of its own medium has been borrowed, a future which acts as a lender of an abstract surplus that becomes concrete in its effects, endowing the present by displacing its center of gravity. Both the structure of time and the structure of feeling that informs Brady's first-person singular subject — grammatically and thematically — are thus intimately related, and it is the nature of this relation that the writing aims to grasp as the sentence itself participates in a search, not of lost time, but rather "my full relation to my time," or the present's temporal form. It's worth quoting one more emblematic sentence as a final illustration:

I understood that, while my entrance had made quite an effect, the effect was all there was, drifting free of the entering body that was its cause and masking even the fact of the entrance itself behind the bibliographical occasion to which it gave rise, or rather fall, converting the potential energy of the encounter to a cold lump of ballast, the battle having been fought, decided against me, and entered into the chronicle by the time I folded myself into a too-small child's rocking chair in a dark corner and prepared for the inevitable moment when one of the family would back into me and, thinking they had discovered some rare and valuable coincidence, offer to pay an inflated admission to the privileged affective states I carried in the air around my head as the sublimates of all the knowledge of the wide world I had managed to assemble for my own index, reading the travel section of the *Tampa Tribune*, its lavish far-right praise for the bucolic splendor and radical quiet of the pacified Honduran back country, while waiting for my no-frills student haircut.<sup>93</sup>

## Conclusion

In "Autumn of the System," Clover writes, "Narrative is out there somewhere — but it is processed into structure before it can appear. Late capitalism's drive to plunder and hollow out the future cannot be understood as fundamentally narrative.... Narrative must exist as a potential exactly so that we can experience its very displacement — ...for it is this which grants access to globalization's process of structuration, its ineluctable transformation of one logic into the other."<sup>94</sup> Similarly, one might say together with Clover that "value is" — "this is the ontology of capital as such" — but that it, too, is processed into structure before it can appear, the way Marx tells us on the first page of *Capital*, Volume 1 that capitalist wealth itself "appears as an immense collection of commodities."<sup>95</sup> My questions, then, have attempted to take seriously

the promise of Brady's experimental approach to literary form *to feel* — in the very bowels of its sentential syntax — the structure of that appearance. Rather than mere resistance to the mystification of transparency characteristic of communicative norms, and rather than mere re-presentation of something already known, both *Microclimates* and *Occupational Treatment* enable cognitive access to the elusive structure of value as it has become immanent to the body of subjective experience itself. The strain that Brady's sentence manifests together with the displacements that result yield profound insight precisely through its effort to narrate. These are displacements whose formal and grammatical manifestations are mediated by the local and global displacements — interruptions, gaps, holes — that the novels themselves attempt to account for, but whose mediations threaten to elude cogent apprehension as quickly as they make themselves felt. Hence, the usefulness of the factitious arrest that narrative offers, even as that arrest draws attention to its own *fictionity*, that is, to the “combative temporalities” it fails to contain.

At stake here, then, is the question of what an experimental novel can do in an effort to grasp the temporal displacements of financialized experience, the experience of no experience and the “empty horizons of futurity” that enclose it. What are the limits of narrative's capacity to sense, perceive, and cognize the dynamics, contradictions, and occulted relations that structure our contemporary crises? This is not necessarily a question of representation, but rather one of feeling, sensing, and perceiving the processes that shape our world — production, circulation, consumption — *as if for the first time* through a method of embodied subjectivization enabled by a radical approach to first person narration. As an extension of the very situation it attempts to narrate, Brady's novels perform what Clover refers to as “narrative's mediated dissolution into structure,” a structure whose relation to the novels' grammatical “I” becomes impossible to articulate fully insofar as that structure has already penetrated body, landscape, and utterance alike.<sup>96</sup> Nevertheless, the sentence acts as that relation's most precise instrument of registration — an exteriorization of the system's sensorium — and the placement of the subject within its grammatical and syntactic terms enables a reader to feel the structures that exceed it.

At the same time, it's important to recognize how the formal qualities of Brady's sentences simply amplify the most generic features characteristic of any sentence, which must, as a rule, balance its diachronic movement through time with its synchronic organization and the regulations imposed by the deferred grammatical period. Thus, whatever relation might inhere between the involuted syntax of Brady's prose and the violent depredations of capital won't submit to an easy homology flattened by an equal sign, as if the temporal structure of a sentence's unfolding could map flushly onto an equivalent temporal structure of capital's valorization and realization. There is no such equivalence that isn't forced. Nevertheless, Brady's sentences distinguish themselves as their formal preoccupations map onto their thematic obsessions with temporal displacement enabling one to sense that structure

through something like a phenomenology of value.

In short, Brady's narratives bring the banalities of everyday life — "dinner had grown cold" — into relation with global processes whereby "some unheralded disaster" might at any moment have "swept away another bit of infrastructure."<sup>97</sup> The novels achieve this by way of cutting a paradigmatic figure against which any banal particular might come into focus as a part of the inarticulate whole in which the seemingly trivial detail is embedded:

Once understood thus, the whole pattern cast my episodes in the shower, previously understood to be caught in the contradictory grip of private impulse and administrative reason, in the far more quotidian and public light of what I remained naïve enough to call civil society, making it clear that what I sought was the trace of recent history in the varying smells of urine atomizing and diffusing through the superheated steam that fogged the windows, mirroring exhalations of the streets themselves that evening as the rain let up, just in time for us to drag the TV out into the yard and gather round to watch a bit of wrestling.<sup>98</sup>

No doubt, *Microclimates* and *Occupational Treatment* are inexhaustible, and without even touching on their incorporation of lyric verses whose persistent interruptions offer another formal horizon against which to measure the work's non-narrative limits, I have at least managed to skim the surface of the novels' depths with the hope of drawing attention to the promise they offer those of us committed not only to the formal possibilities of experimental literary form, but to what those possibilities are capable of showing us about our current situation.

## Notes

1. Taylor Brady, *Microclimates* (San Francisco: Krupskaya, 2001), and Taylor Brady, *Occupational Treatment* (Berkeley: Atelos, 2006). This essay owes an immense debt of gratitude to Brian Whitener, whose critical engagement with the piece has been invaluable. Thanks, too, to Joshua Clover for invaluable feedback.
2. Brady, *Microclimates* 89.
3. *Microclimates* 15.
4. Annie McClanahan, "Investing in the Future," *Journal of Cultural Economy* 6:1 (2013) 90.
5. Robert Smithson, "Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey," *The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley: U California P, 1996) 72.
6. Smithson, "Monuments" 73.
7. "Monuments" 72.
8. *ibid.*
9. Brady, *Treatment* 230.
10. *Microclimates* 15.
11. Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (Minneapolis: U



- Minnesota P, 1983) 207.
12. "Monuments" 72.
  13. Robert Guttman, *How Credit-Money Shapes the Economy: The United States in a Global System* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1994) 12, qtd., Leigh Claire La Berge, "The Rules of Abstraction: Methods and Discourses of Finance," *Radical History Review* 118 (Winter 2014) 95.
  14. La Berge, "Abstraction" 95.
  15. Sianne Ngai pursues the implications of La Berge's insight into abstraction in "Visceral Abstractions," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 21:1 (January 2015): 33-63. I'm indebted to Ngai for pointing me toward La Berge's work.
  16. *Treatment* 245.
  17. "Abstraction" 101-102.
  18. Franco "Bifo" Berardi, *The Uprising: On Poetry and Finance* (Los Angeles: Semiotext[e], 2012) 157.
  19. For an excellent analysis of the emergent hegemony of the profit-driven daily, see Richard Terdiman, "Newspaper Culture: Institutions of Discourse, Discourse of Institutions," *Discourse/Counter-Discourse: The Theory and Practice of Symbolic Resistance in Nineteenth-Century France* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985) 117-148.
  20. Giovanni Arrighi, "The Winding Paths of Capital," Interview with David Harvey, *New Left Review* 56 (March/April 2009) 71.
  21. David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (London: Blackwell, 1989).
  22. Harvey, *Condition* 147.
  23. *Condition* 160-61.
  24. *Financial Times*, 8 May 1987, qtd. *Condition* 161.
  25. "Abstraction" 95, emphasis added.
  26. *Condition* 167. For an excellent discussion of "abstract labor," see Ngai's "Visceral Abstractions" (36-45).
  27. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Volume I, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1992) 346.
  28. Stan Davis and Christopher Meyer, *Blur: The Speed of Change in the Connected Economy* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 1999), and Randy Martin, *The Financialization of Daily Life* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2002) 36.
  29. Martin, *Financialization* 43.
  30. *Treatment* 255.
  31. Robin Blackburn, "The Subprime Crisis," *New Left Review* 50 (March-April, 2008) 92-93.
  32. Peter Linebaugh, "Enclosures from the Bottom Up," *Stop Thief: The Commons, Enclosures and Resistance* (Oakland: PM Press, 2014) 142.
  33. *Treatment* 241-43.
  34. *Microclimates* 48.
  35. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1969) 258.
  36. *Microclimates* 15.
  37. *ibid.*
  38. Benjamin, "Theses" 258.
  39. Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude* (Los Angeles: Semiotext[e], 2004). "For Aristotle (*Rhetoric*, I,

2, 1358a) the *topoi koinoi* are the most generally valid logical and linguistic forms of all of our discourse (let us even say, the skeletal structure of it); they allow for the existence of every individual expression we use and they give structure to these expressions as well. Such ‘places’ are *common* because no one can do without them (from the refined orator to the drunkard who mumbles words hard to understand, from the business person to the politician)” (35-36).

40. For my treatment of the “common place” in Brady’s lyric verse, see Rob Halpern, “Sensing the Common Place: Taylor Brady’s Dialectical Lyric,” *On Contemporary Practice* (Brooklyn: Cuneiform, 2008) 57-72. Online at <http://static1.squarespace.com/static/52010d47e4boeefc5e9e9bfo/t/5286b73ae4bo16cod8315493/1384560442904/halpern+ON+brady.pdf>.
41. Taylor Brady, “Narrative Occupation and Uneven Enclosure,” *Biting the Error: Writers Explore Narrative*, eds. Mary Burger, Robert Glück, Camille Roy, and Gail Scott (Toronto: Coach House, 2004) 190.
42. *ibid.*
43. Roman Jakobson, “Linguistics and Poetics,” *Style in Language*, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1960). “The poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination” (358).
44. Carla Harryman, “Introduction: Non/Narrative,” *Journal of Narrative Theory*, 41:1 (Spring 2011) 2. See, too, Barrett Watten, “Nonnarative and the Construction of History,” *The Constructivist Moment: From Material Text to Cultural Poetics* (Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 2003).
45. Joshua Clover, “Retcon: Value and Temporality in Poetics,” *Representations* 126 (Spring 2014) 11.
46. Brady, “Narrative” 192. A variant appears in *Treatment*, 263. I’ve chosen to quote “Narrative Occupation” for its direct and reflexive reference to composing the novel.
47. *Treatment* 276.
48. *Treatment* 276-77.
49. *Treatment* 206, 74.
50. *Treatment* 228. For a slight variant, see “Narrative” 186.
51. *Treatment* 252. For a slight variant, see “Narrative” 189.
52. *ibid.*
53. *ibid.*
54. *ibid.*
55. *ibid.* For excellent explorations of the poetics of stuttering that extend and deepen Brady’s allusion, see Jordan Scott, *Blert* (Toronto: Coach House, 2008); Craig Dworkin, “The Stutter of Form,” *The Sound of Poetry/The Poetry of Sound*, ed. Marjorie Perloff and Craig Dworkin (Chicago: U Chicago P, 2007) 166-83; Gilles Deleuze, “He Stuttered,” *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco (Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 1997).
56. *Treatment* 216.
57. According to the “Draft Proposal of the Nonsite Collective,” a collectively composed text and photocopied pamphlet to which Brady contributed, together with myself and others: “Sites may appear to be immediately accessible within the grid of mediated experience and representation — they may even be thoroughly mapped there — yet ‘site’ remains withdrawn from active social recognition. Like the subtracted center of coherent vision in Smithson’s *Enantiomorphic Chambers*, sites paradoxically *disappear*. Perhaps, sites can be thought of as quasi-voids in a catastrophic situation (the catastrophe of

vision 'as the eyes / near wreck / to create / when they see'): while fused to the structure of that situation, sites remain themselves difficult to perceive through their structures and effects. Put differently, sites might refer to events or processes whose consequences can't be admitted to vision without threatening the coherence of everything else that appears. Sites may be scenes of occulted disaster, or the most banal forms of ongoing social erosion. In short, sites present themselves as blindspots. Non-sites, by contrast, are invented, devised, artificial, and they bear the weight of their own visibility. In 'A Provisional Theory of Non-Sites,' Smithson refers to the non-site as 'a three dimensional logical picture that is *abstract*, yet it *represents* an actual site .... A 'logical picture' differs from a natural or realistic picture in that it rarely looks like the thing it stands for. Unlike real sites, non-sites can be abandoned at any time, whenever they cease to be useful (say, for mobilizing attention).... Non-sites are logical pictures or narrations that are abstract, even as they aim to make the concrete dimension of real sites perceptible." In this sense, I think of Brady's novels as quasi-nonsites.

58. "Narrative" 185.
59. *Microclimates* 7.
60. *Treatment* 15, 119, 228.
61. *Treatment* 277.
62. *Treatment* 239.
63. *Treatment* 242.
64. *Treatment* 276-77.
65. *ibid.*
66. "Narrative" 185, *Treatment* 193-94.
67. *Treatment* 262.
68. *Treatment* 252.
69. Karl Marx, *Capital*, Volume 2, trans. David Fernbach (London: Penguin, 1978) 185.
70. "Narrative" 190.
71. *Capital*, Volume II 185.
72. *Treatment* 261.
73. "Narrative" 184.
74. "Narrative" 190.
75. Joshua Clover, "Autumn of the System: Poetry and Finance Capital," *Journal of Narrative Theory* 41:1 (Spring 2011) 39.
76. "Autumn" 36.
77. *ibid.*
78. *Capital*, Volume 2, 185-86.
79. *ibid.*
80. "Autumn" 45.
81. *ibid.*
82. *ibid.* I am grateful here to Joshua Clover for his generous engagement and feedback through personal correspondence.
83. "Autumn" 39.
84. *Treatment* 228.

85. "Narrative" 191.
86. In his essay "Retcon," Joshua Clover's argument in part hangs on a reading of Clark Coolidge's collection of fragments, "From Notebooks" (1975-1982), among which he quotes the following:

I am moving in  
opposite directions at once.  
Like a sentence, when written, seems to  
move backwards to complete its hold  
on itself. The dialectic of forward  
and reverse.

While I don't mean to suggest that Brady, although himself a close reader of Coolidge, took his cues from these same fragments, there is nevertheless an uncanny resonance between these lines and Brady's own "going forward while knowing that one has to go back, and knowing that going back remains a kind of forward motion that will not fully recover the initial lapse." Clark Coolidge, "From Notebooks (1975-1982)," *Code of Signals*, ed. Michael Palmer (Berkeley: North Atlantic, 1983) 174-75 (qtd. in Clover, *Retcon* 21).
87. The allusion to Althusser's theory of structural causality, whereby the structure of the social whole — something like a full relation to present time — can only be apprehended in its particular effects, ought not go unmentioned. Indeed, Brady acknowledges his debt to Althusser on the first page of *Microclimates* by way of an epigraph — "The characters of the time seem strangers to the characters of the lightening" — a sentence that appears in one of Althusser's few essays on aesthetics, "The 'Piccolo Teatro': Bertolazzi and Brecht Notes on a Materialist Theatre" (*For Marx*). Arguably, any Althusserian approach to history as a process without a subject is inadequate to our moment. And while Brady's novels aggressively rehabilitate a subject, this is not the agent of history, but rather the subject of its own narrations, themselves but a representation of history.
88. *Treatment* 228-29, emphasis original
89. *Treatment* 261.
90. *Treatment* 230.
91. *ibid.*
92. *Microclimates* 116.
93. *Treatment* 66-67.
94. "Autumn" 45, 47.
95. *Capital*, Volume I 125.
96. "Autumn" 48.
97. *Microclimates* 36.
98. *Microclimates* 37-38.



## Deep Marxism: Richard Wright's *The Outsider* and the Making of a Postwar Aesthetic

Konstantina M. Karageorgos

The text contains its own gloss.<sup>1</sup>

### Return of the Native Son?

In January 1955, less than two years after its American debut, the French translation of *The Outsider* was published. Translated as *Le Transfuge* (literally, *The Defector*) by the French Cubist painter Guy de Montlaur, the edition was prefaced by a new introduction written by Wright. Unexpected by a readership inured to the third-person foreword, the introduction's opening, which forewent clarity for strangely calibrated sentences, did little to mediate its unconventional presence. Rather than offer readers pragmatic guidance on how to approach his long-anticipated second novel, Wright wrote at odd angles about its production.<sup>2</sup> Clear that *The Outsider* was "the first" of his "literary efforts projected out of a heart with no ideological burdens," Wright offered no positive terms to indicate what that freedom signified. In sentences where proper nouns are offered — such as the one in which Wright affirmed the novel as evidence of his "search for a new attitude to replace Marxism" — the rhematic emphasis on "search" nullified thematic expectations associated with the many faces of "Marxism" in circulation during the Cold War. By Wright's rhetorical calculation, Marxism was no longer the proper name for an ideology, theory of political economy, or philosophy of dialectical and/or historical materialism, but a degenerated affective state that resulted, one was left to presume, from the vagaries of contemporary political appropriations. Leaving the reader at the threshold of interpretation, Wright exits the subject of Marxism and ideology to conclude with a perfunctory acknowledgment of his "much improved" writing conditions in Paris. Though it is not without illocutionary force, Wright's introduction was compromised by a lopsided semantics of contradiction in which meaning never ran downstream.



No stranger to “the Henry James style–Preface,” Wright’s introduction to *The Outsider* signaled a radical departure from his previous explanatory style.<sup>3</sup> Whereas his prior efforts, which included the famous corrective “How Bigger Was Born” (1940) and the photo text *12 Million Black Voices* (1941), published a year later as an additional though lesser-known supplement to *Native Son*, were designed to eliminate confusion about the social and political value of his work, his most recent iteration seemed to court the inverse reaction. What could such a strategy mean for an author once so desperate to lift the “sociological fog” that obscured his critical message?<sup>4</sup>

While such indeterminacy has the potential to confirm the most troubling aspects of Wright’s postwar reputation — as an author suspended between cultures, political platforms, and philosophic schools — his elusive rhetoric was both strategic and instructive. Far from wishing to alienate the reader, Wright’s introduction functions as a primer to the critical form of *The Outsider*, which dialectically examines the limits of orthodox Marxism (or, Marx without Hegel) and Idealist ontology (or, Hegel without Marx) in the context of the twentieth century’s most pernicious ideological advent, that of totalitarianism.

As a political concept, totalitarianism evolved from a particular name for Mussolini’s doctrine of Italian fascism as “a new political style — everything within the state, nothing outside the state, nothing against the state” to an appellation associated with nationalist socialism throughout Europe to, finally, the Cold War formulation that expanded the term to include Communist regimes.<sup>5</sup> While Wright was working on *The Outsider*, the term was repurposed by major political theorists on the peripheries of the Left, including Hannah Arendt and J.L. Talmon in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) and *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy* (1952) respectively. Wright was in possession of both books, and although it is impossible to say with real precision the extent to which he engaged with either, his novel offers a critique of the theoretical foundations of both. Whereas Arendt’s staggering work of political philosophy insisted on the specific character of modern despotism in the twinned forms of Nazism and Stalinism, on “totalitarianism, not merely dictatorship,” Talmon’s *Origins of Totalitarian Democracy* saw the possibility for totalitarian practices to flourish in ostensibly free democracies, where nominally free citizens are stripped of any real power despite possessing highly coveted civil rights. If this form of governance, which Talmon identified as “totalitarian democracy,” appears to resonate with the Marxian indictment of liberalism, Talmon’s dread and invalidation of revolution disabuses us of the connection. Wright’s theorization of totalitarianism in *The Outsider* encompasses the flawed polarized logic in both. For Wright, totalitarianism was not a degeneration of Western democracy, but a symptom of it.

In order to show how, why, and to what end Wright examined (and exposed) the inner link between the ideological positions of demotic Marxism and Idealist ontology in the context of Cold War totalitarianism, the critique offered in *The Outsider* must be situated in the context of his evolving political and theoretical relationship to

Marxism. Although *The Outsider* constitutes a radical shift in form, Wright's impulse to thwart appropriative logic in the context of his personal relationship to Marxist thought is prefigured by and is an extension of an earlier rupture: his break, in both style and method, from the principles of proletarian literature in his formal and conceptual overhaul of *Native Son's* final scene.<sup>6</sup> Anxious that his ending, which had "Bigger going smack to the electric chair," too closely resembled the narrative logic of *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938), Wright turned to heterodox Marxist rhetorician Kenneth Burke, from whom he appropriated the idea of a poetic Marx.<sup>7</sup> Wright took seriously Burke's recommendation that committed writers discard propagandistic mandates for a more gestural ethic, and implemented Burke's proposal in his ambitious but ultimately unsuccessful "poetic revision" of the novel's final scene. While Wright's revised conclusion had helped him to actualize his pledge to produce a story that left readers "without the consolation of tears," his attempt to forge a dramatic method informed by Marx, but external to Party-sanctioned forms of schematization, fell short.<sup>8</sup> The totalizing effect of Wright's final scene was not enough to undo the narrative's causal logic, which advanced a base-superstructure model of social understanding. Communism, rather than Marxism, emerged as the novel's watchword.

Although Wright had intended for his appropriation of Burke's Marxian "poetics of action" to reflect the structural nuance of his own position between Marxisms, this critical distinction was lost on his readers. Wright's response to widespread critical misprision was twofold. Publicly, he directed his anger toward the liberal press. Exercising little self-control, Wright blasted liberal journalists, focusing the majority of his vitriol on David L. Cohn, whose negative review of *Native Son*, "The Negro Novel: Richard Wright," confused the novel's representation of violence with advocacy. Privately, Wright blamed himself. His segmented approach to Marxism, evidenced by his attempt to "weave" Marxism into his novel via seven "poetic motifs," had done little to distinguish it from other forms of social protest.<sup>9</sup> Wright's characteristic sensitivity to reviews was thus compounded by the emergence of an inconvenient truth: his attempt to approximate Marxist critique in narrative form was weakened not only by the interpretive constraints of his readership, but by serious restrictions in his own understanding of Marx's thought. Wright's experience with Burke, whom he had trusted for his apparent sensitivity to race, and ultimately turned to for his heterodox interpretation of Marx, had clearly led him astray. At odds with both the Party and America's first Marxist, Wright began to shift his focus away from Marxist appropriations in both literature and politics to the principal texts of Marx's thought.<sup>10</sup>

### **An Outsider Emerges**

To claim that Richard Wright became a Marxist in the midst of his fallout with the Communist Party is paradoxical, but for the self-styled artist and intellectual the

paradox stands. In 1940, Wright began to assemble a Marxist library that exceeded his prior, Party-based focus on revolutionary strategy (Lenin) and the role of minorities in the revolution (Stalin).<sup>11</sup> Aware that the truth in Marx's thought lay in its method, Wright embarked on a six-year study of dialectics, in which he swapped Marxism's "mass leaders" — William Z. Foster's joint appellation for Lenin and Stalin — for Marx and Hegel. Wright's first acquisition was *Capital*, Volume I (1867), which he purchased in New York just before he left for Cuernavaca, Mexico that April. In the subsequent months and years before his move to France, Wright acquired volumes II and III of *Capital* (posthumously published in 1885 and 1894, respectively), Marx's and Engels' *The Civil War in the United States* (1861), and *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848), and Hegel's *The Phenomenology of Mind* (1910) and *Science of Logic* (1929). In addition to these primary texts, Wright obtained two supplementary aids for his reading of Hegel, William Wallace's *Prolegomena to the Study of Hegel's Philosophy and Especially of His Logic* (1894) and *The Logic of Hegel* (1892). Significantly, Wright did not trade the Scottish philosopher's explanations of Hegel for Alexandre Kojève's. Though the latter was the unqualified spearhead of the postwar Hegel revival on the Continent, leaving an indelible imprint on French intellectual culture in which Wright was soon to be immersed, his admiration for Stalin who had, according to Kojève, replaced Napoleon as the "culmination of the end of history" had, for Wright, trumped his philosophical dexterity.<sup>12</sup>

As was the case for his reading of *Permanence and Change*, non-fictional documentation of Wright's impressions of the above texts is limited. Outside of a humorous story recorded in his 1946 essay "How Jim Crow Feels," in which Wright is stopped by a Mexican guard who finds a copy of *Capital* in his luggage and assumes he is a Communist, specific details on this period (1940-46) in Wright's Marxist evolution are sparse, obscured by more dramatic biographical aspects and events including his separation from the Party in 1942, official break in 1944, and move to France in 1946. Although these events affirmed nothing more than Wright's autonomy from oppressive ideological institutions (i.e., the State and the Party), the combination of his political remove and distance from existing communities of dissident Marxists subjected Wright to a new and higher degree of cultural and political suspicion. It did not matter that Wright's isolation was self-selected, nor that his decision to maintain independence from groups mired in a similar theoretical quandary, including two famous (and separate) clusters that included his friends Ralph Ellison and the West Indian Trotskyist C.L.R. James, was one of self-preservation and intellectual integrity. What did matter was that Wright's independence seemed to take him further from those forms of oppression (i.e., the "Negro-hating South," American bourgeois society, and the CPUSA) that had not only marked his work but "stealed his talent."<sup>13</sup> Phrased as an expression of concern, Constance Webb, more than likely speaking on behalf of her husband at the time, C.L.R. James, perhaps said it best when she expressed concern that Wright would "lose himself" in France among the existentialists, who

“blamed the individual for the problems of society.”

Preliminary unease with Wright’s move(s) proved prophetic when *The Outsider* was finally published in the United States on March 16, 1953. White ex-Communists praised the novel for its political remove and considered it Wright’s perfectly timed exit from the race-based sociological novel and entry into the cosmopolitan novel of ideas, going so far as to cast it as a melodramatic cognate to Whittaker Chambers’s book *Witness* (1952).<sup>14</sup> Those closer to Wright’s actual politics, including Communist playwright Lorraine Hansberry, the militant novelist and critic Lloyd Brown, and Left critic J. Saunders Redding eviscerated Wright for his generic and political departure.<sup>15</sup> For Margaret Walker, Wright’s movement through Jung, Husserl, and Heidegger impedes his search to go beyond the “simple and immediate” to the “universal and profound.”<sup>16</sup> Yet the cruelest, and consequently the most culturally deft review came not from an expected antagonist, but from longtime friend to Wright, distinguished writer and critic Arna Bontemps. Cutting to the quick, Bontemps leveled the novel’s political, formal, and philosophical tensions to pronounce the book as the prurient product of Wright’s “roll in the hay with the existentialism of Sartre.”<sup>17</sup>

Though few critics before and after were as pointedly crass in their characterization of the novel’s relationship to French thought, Bontemps’ trumped-up critique of Wright’s philosophical foray was prolonged by decades of critical confusion on the precise relationship of *The Outsider* to Continental philosophy. While critics no longer reduce the novel’s philosophical topoi to a simple (and sycophantic) relation between Wright and the postwar French intellectuals with whom he was associated, the process of identifying in order to assess Wright’s philosophical (and consequently, political) investments via *The Outsider*’s philosophical references remains compulsory, as if the novel’s intrinsic meaning and value as an historical artifact of the Cold War hinges on a lost allusion to one, or several, Continental philosophers referenced in the novel among Cross Damon’s reading. While this process has produced several brilliant essays that successfully disprove Wright’s intellectual acquiescence to Sartre, the critical disruption is only temporary — Sartre is deposed only to be replaced by another, this time German figure linked to both Wright’s postwar intellectual interests and Damon’s philosophical library.<sup>18</sup> No longer Sartrean, Wright is assigned Damon’s philosophical stance and becomes Nietzschean (Thompson), Husserlian (Gilroy), and Heideggerian (Atteberry and JanMohamed). Marx, who is not listed in the novel among Damon’s reading and is, on all but one occasion, only mentioned in the context of Communist appropriations, is accordingly eliminated from critical consideration — emerging only to confirm that the novel’s residual representations of Marx serve as evidence of the “scar left by Wright’s years as a communist.”<sup>19</sup>

Without contesting the relevance of philosophical themes to *The Outsider*, I insist that the novel’s relationship to philosophy, and specifically the form of its representation, cannot be understood outside the impress of Wright’s Marxist education. Though frequently overshadowed by *The Outsider*’s twinned critique of

Stalinism and Fascism — two evils symbolically killed off in the novel's representation of the “double totalitarian murder” of Communist Gil Blount and Fascist Langley Herndon—Wright's narrative offers a full-scale critique of totalitarian thought anticipating Slavoj Žižek rather than Hannah Arendt.<sup>20</sup> For Wright, as for Žižek, totalitarianism was not the name of a diabolical political entity or coupling of diabolical political entities, but a metonym for unnameable, shape-shifting networks of power in which we are unendingly bound.<sup>21</sup> Philosophy, frequently viewed from within its ranks as a discourse external to State-sponsored regimes of power, was for Wright (as for Marx) a part of this network.<sup>22</sup> Social critique was necessarily immanent — that is, issued from within the contradictions of existing social relations; the notion of issuing a critique from outside the system was the realm of ideology. Though he does not, in *The Outsider*, go so far as to equate philosophy with oppressive political regimes, he does demonstrate — through his dramatization of Damon's uncritical embrace of reified philosophical concepts, including Husserl's phenomenological reduction, Nietzsche's nihilism, and Kierkegaard's critique of atheism or faithlessness — the extent to which philosophers act, mostly unconsciously, as functionaries of the State.

### Early Days in France: Negotiating Hegel and Marx

When Wright began work on *The Outsider* in 1946, he was not yet versed in phenomenology, nor was he especially well read in French existentialism. He had, however, expressed interest in writing a novel that pursued a philosophical problem, that of consciousness, and was eager to advance his project on modern alienation in an intellectual culture that neither shrank from nor sentimentalized his independence from extant political or social groups.<sup>23</sup> Wright describes this independence in his essay “I Choose Exile” (1950):

France is, above all, a land of refuge. Even when there is a shortage of food, Frenchmen will share their crusts of bread with strangers. Yet, nowhere do you see so much gaiety as in Paris, nowhere can you hear so much spirited talk. Each contemporary event is tasted, chewed, digested. There is no first-rate French novelist specializing in creating unreal, romantic historical novels! The present is to be understood and they find it exciting enough. “The problems of philosophy,” says Jean-Paul Sartre, “are to be found in the streets.” I have encountered among the French no social snobbery. The more individualistic a man is, the more acceptable he is. The spirit of the mob, whether intellectual, racial, or moral, is the very opposite of the spirit of French life. SOIT RAISONNABLE (be reasonable) is their motto.<sup>24</sup>

Although Wright had not yet secured the novel's narrative structure, his newfound freedom from knee-jerk ideological judgment provided him with the necessary space



to move between opposed philosophic modes, idealism and materialism, in search of a critical (rather than strictly political) position that embraced the individual even in its recognition of the individual as a socially constituted subject.

While the French intellectual embrace of Wright functioned as a key form of intellectual support and confidence to an embattled intellectual, his concept for the novel came not from French philosophy, but from by an unresolved tension in his reading of Marx and Hegel. A committed materialist who rejected as illusory the idealist notion of “pure thought,” and the understanding of consciousness as “an entity in possession of its own truth,” Wright remained critical of Marxism’s categorical rejection of consciousness as immaterial.<sup>25</sup> For Wright, inquiry into the sundered consciousness was not a decadent, epiphenomenal concern fated to intensify social atomization, but a procedure necessary to any radical disruption of the existing social order. The elaboration of a revolutionary alternative to advanced capitalism required a revaluation of the individual outside the determinist concept of “human potential,” which maintained an interest in the capacities of man only insofar as those capacities were among those that benefited the collective.

Without challenging Marx’s definition of consciousness as a material concept that described an individual’s relation to his environment, Wright wished to expand the conceptual terrain of environmental degradation beyond its naturalist trappings. According to Wright, human wretchedness was insufficiently represented by rote descriptions of class warfare, which tended to overemphasize the visible conditions of catastrophic social phenomena (including poverty and racism) at the cost of the particular conditions of forms of ideological servitude. A 1948 letter to Dorothy Norman provides a record of Wright’s frustration with such positivist currents in Marxist thought:

The Right and Left, in different ways, have decided that man is a kind of animal whose needs can be met by making more and more articles for him to consume. If man is to be contained in that definition and if it is not to be challenged, then that is what will prevail; and a world will be built in which everybody will get enough to eat and full stomachs will be equated with contentment and freedom, and those who will say that they are not happy under such a regime will be guilty of treason. How sad that is. We are all accomplices in this crime.... Is it too late to say something to halt it, modify it?<sup>26</sup>

Wright found an answer, albeit a provisional and ultimately disappointing one, later that year in the *Rassemblement Démocratique Révolutionnaire* (henceforth, RDR), an anti-Stalinist organization led by former French Trotskyist David Rousset that pledged to “give new life to the principles of liberty and human dignity by linking them to the struggle for social revolution.”<sup>27</sup> Though Wright was long disenchanted with what he



referred to as “politics proper,” the 1948 Soviet blockade of Berlin, which carried the threat of a Third World War, softened his position.<sup>28</sup> As additional encouragement, nearly everyone in Wright’s immediate social circle backed the organization.<sup>29</sup>

Wright’s public support of the RDR lasted approximately eleven months. Though he did not have an official position, his role in the organization approximated that of a cultural attaché. Wright educated the philosophical Left on the particular difficulties that African American dissidents experienced at home and abroad on at least three occasions, the first delivered at the RDR’s inaugural conference, “The Internationalism of the Mind,” held at the Sorbonne. Though there was much buzz around Wright’s involvement, his tenure as the organization’s African American ambassador was brief, ending when Rousset compromised the RDR’s position of non-alignment, of “neither Washington nor Moscow,” by lessening his previously unqualified condemnation of Western capitalism. Though Rousset never established clear ties to the U.S., his political stock dipped, and the organization disbanded within the year.

The dissolution of the RDR had unexpected consequences for Wright. Though habituated to political disappointment, Wright was unprepared for the sudden upsurge of political militancy among friends previously committed to positions of Left non-alignment. Albert Camus, whom Wright had admired for his strident independence in political and artistic pursuits, aligned himself more closely with staunch anti-Communists including Arthur Koestler, who by then had financial and ideological ties to the CIA. Sartre was even more disappointing. Unlike Camus, Sartre saw the RDR’s political openness as its chief weakness. Voluntarism would not, according to Sartre, foster a revolutionary movement but would, as evidenced by the RDR’s political precariousness, promote instability. Calling instead for definitive action supported by a stable political structure, Sartre began to voice support for the organizational principles of bolshevism. Though he remained ambivalent about the role of Stalin in the revolution — he opposed forced labor camps but unequivocally supported the Soviet invasion of Hungary — Sartre moved closer to *Parti communiste français* (henceforth PCF), an organization with notoriously “backward prejudices” on race that had personally attacked Wright two years prior.<sup>30</sup>

Despite clear points of animus, there was never an official break between the two. Save for one occasion in 1953 when Wright characterized as “stupid” Sartre’s claim that “one could work with the Party while still criticizing it” in a *New York Times* article Wright remained mostly loyal to Sartre well after the latter’s full-blown Communist conversion.<sup>31</sup> Wright publicly sided with Sartre over French intellectuals with whom he had much more in common, such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who had entered into full, public battle with Sartre over his uncritical “ultrabolshevism.”<sup>32</sup> Continued sympathy for his friend notwithstanding, Wright emerged from the ordeal newly hardened against the French philosophical Left, and began to critically reexamine his place within it. Wright noted that although he thrived socially and intellectually in France, his critical capacities had languished under what he described as the

“curated freedom” of the French.<sup>33</sup> On one hand, he had witnessed an unparalleled and almost “mythical sense of intellectual freedom” among the French, who were not only undeterred by the persistent antagonism between the mind and materialism, but made the contradiction of consciousness and environment central to existentialist humanism.<sup>34</sup> On the other, Wright remained suspicious of the ease with which French intellectuals transformed social struggles into episodic causes célèbres. Aspects of Sartre that Wright had initially found appealing, such as his “voluntary identification of the French experience” under occupation with the colonized people of the Africa, were now cast in a different light. Though he never went so far as to characterize Sartre’s position as co-optive, as he had with the Party, he increasingly came to see Sartre’s position as both privileged and illusory. In place of open enmity grew the seeds of critique.

### Philosophy as a Discourse of Domination

Despite his increasing disillusionment with the micropolitics of postwar French intellectual culture, Wright was not yet prepared to reject in toto the transformative potential of ontological inquiry. Though he had moved beyond the existential humanism of Sartre, the allure of the phenomenological approach to modern philosophical questions, especially the problem of individual freedom in an imposed reality, persisted. Reminded, once again, that cultural proficiency did not constitute metacritical understanding, Wright redoubled his efforts and turned to the father of twentieth-century phenomenology, Edmund Husserl, for guidance.

Wright located his investigation of Husserlian phenomenology in Husserl’s *Ideas towards a Pure Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy* (1913), the third installment in Husserl’s lifelong project to redeem philosophy as a science through the development of an unprejudiced description of the essential structures of subjective experience. Though Husserl’s philosophy was then considered the intellectual terrain of professional philosophers in whom Wright had little faith (including the French philosophical Left and Husserl’s most famous pupil, Martin Heidegger, who by 1949 was publicly judged a *Mitläufer*), *Ideas* was an expansive text at the cusp of process philosophy and social psychology, two areas of inquiry in which Wright had an abiding interest. Beyond Husserl’s potential contribution to already-existing intellectual interests, Wright considered the philosopher’s emphasis on the possibility for subjective experience, unfettered by the necessity of a collective synthesis, a welcome reprieve from the humanist worldview of the French Left which seemed to tolerate difference, including racial difference, as a *provisional* stage in the process of universalization.

Wright’s immersion in Husserl was intense but short lived. If Wright thought that he was, in Husserl’s *Ideas*, undertaking a more focused version of Henri Bergson’s *Creative Evolution* (1911), which he had read with great interest the year before, what he found was a long and frustrating exercise in speculative futility. Objectives and

concepts that initially captivated Wright, including Husserl's representation of the transcendental ego as an experiential domain, his promise to deliver a full, scientific account of consciousness on all of its "cognitive, volitional, affective levels," and the possibility for the "mediating philosopher" to temporarily bracket imposed reality to experience weightlessness and astonishment (phenomenological reduction), were undone by Husserl's historical relativism and utter lack of concern for the materiality of the body.<sup>35</sup> Husserl's claim that the "mediating philosopher" could stand apart from existing social and historical conditions was the epitome of ideology. Only ideologists, to paraphrase Marx from *The German Ideology*, could claim to stand beside their own class, and to produce ideas that existed beyond social practices. While other dissident Marxists also interested in the possibility for Husserl's method to elaborate on the under-theorized notion of the utopic in Marx remained comfortable linking the phenomenological reduction or *epoche* to utopia in the context of a "purely mental experiment," such as Paul Ricoeur, Wright could not abide a theory of perception that refused to take into consideration the concrete dynamics and logics of actually existing conditions of oppression, including the monumental and *structural* problem of racism, to experience the world anew.<sup>36</sup> No thing-in-itself, the body under racism did not translate into a "bodymind" that could be returned to its "primordial givenness."<sup>37</sup> No matter how disciplined in his study of Husserl's theories of the phenomenological and eidetic reductions, Wright's body was not something he could theorize away.

Disappointed as he must have been, Wright's renewed sense of alienation had a silver lining — it was the final push he needed to secure the narrative structure of *The Outsider*. Though the title was still in flux, Wright determined that the novel would be a "darkly drawn character study," that used philosophy to track the lived experience of a black man struggling with modern forms of alienation. Husserl would figure largely in this dramatization, underpinning the novel's major acts of "creative destruction" including Damon's death hoax and selective amnesia, in Wright's very thinly veiled assault on reduction proper. Finalizing the particulars of his novel with renewed exigency, Wright harnessed the pain, anger, and frustration from his philosophical isolation, combined it with existing political frustration with polarized Cold War politics, and channeled it into a nearly eight-hundred-page treatise against totalitarian thought.

### The Novel

Divided into five alliteratively titled books drawn from Kierkegaardian categories, "Dread," "Dream," "Descent," "Despair," and "Decision," *The Outsider* tells the story of Cross Damon, an erstwhile philosophy student at the University of Chicago, now employed as a postal worker on Chicago's South Side. The novel opens with Damon entering his local bar, The Salty Dog, where he drinks, excessively enough to be reprimanded by his friends, to forget his life. Damon is married with children, but

has an underage mistress who claims that she is pregnant. Saddled with debt, two young boys, a critical wife, and a drinking problem, Damon faces the possibility of having his affair double his troubles. Despairing, Damon takes to the streets, where fate intervenes in the form of a fatal 'L' train accident. After crushing the skull of the accident's only other survivor (on whom Damon plants his identification), Damon flees to New York and assumes a new identity. Damon's social death — an undeclared reference to, and critique of, Husserl's call for the temporary destruction of given reality in order to reemerge in the world unencumbered — and rebirth as Lionel Lane sets the stage for the remaining three books of the novel, in which Wright dramatizes the tragic consequences of Damon's flight from reality.

Before the novel is given over to the more fantastic aspects of Wright's eccentric premise, it introduces the reader to its interpretive coordinates — Marxism, Idealist ontology, and the misreading of both — and its dialectical structure through a protracted opening scene designed to frame Damon's eventual flight from reality as the final stage of a Hegelian odyssey long in the making. Although Wright was warned against opening with a scene that his editor, John Fischer, insisted was "superfluous" to the novel's dramatic action, Wright fought for its inclusion.<sup>38</sup> Wright knew — both from his experience with misreadings of *Native Son* and his awareness of U.S. intellectual culture — that if he did not foreground the novel's critical underpinnings they would be lost in the novel's steady stream of melodrama. Crucial to apprehending the novel's negative form, Wright uses this frame to dramatize the "cataclysmic danger and criminal ruthlessness" as Marx writes, that results from the adoption of transhistorical consciousness.<sup>39</sup>

Following several paragraphs in which Wright locates the reader in the novel's alternative temporality — he describes a group of huddled black men "sloshing" down the dark streets of Chicago on a particularly frigid February toward their local bar before dawn — Wright immediately shifts the narrative focus from the collective suffering of men working the midnight shift to Damon's particularized reading habits and thought experiments. Wright's move from environmental concerns — his naturalistic description of the elemental brutality of Chicago's harsh winters, the misery of working life, and the annihilation of the body — to the vatic montage of remembered events from Damon's learned past forecasts the storm that is to come: the constructed violence of the protagonist's consciousness.

Although the present-tense experiment dramatized in the novel — the possibility for life after social death — is one ostensibly gifted to Damon by an 'L' train accident, it is prefigured in the novel by two elaborate thought-experiments that introduce the connection between Damon's philosophical charlantry and his mercenary logic. In the first of these episodes, Damon's friends recall a moment from several years back where their friend, who is standing on the eleventh floor of the Post Office, tosses coins out his window to unsuspecting passersby:

Early in the evening, when the rush hour was on, he used to — we were working on the 11<sup>th</sup> floor then — lift up the window, run his hand in his pocket and toss out every cent of silver he had. Just throw it all out of the window to the street. And then he'd lean out and watch the commotion of all them little antlike folks down there going wild, scrambling and scratching and clawing after them few pieces of money and then, when the money was all gone, they'd stand looking up to the window of the 11<sup>th</sup> floor with their mouths hanging open like fishes out of water. And Cross'd be laughing to beat all hell. And Cross'd say that them folks was praying when their faces were turned up like that, waiting for more money to fall. Haha.<sup>40</sup>

While the men recall this comical reprieve in an otherwise monotonous workday with fond nostalgia, their mirth is disrupted by Damon's refusal to join in on the laughter. No longer "laughing to beat all hell," Damon's real-time expression is marked by "detachment."<sup>41</sup> Disappointed but unsurprised by Damon's willful remove, the men, who had summoned up the scene in an attempt to remind their depressed friend of better times, re-signify the memory in accordance with Damon's intellectual vanity. Aware on some level that Damon's former immersion in "big deep books" had given rise to his "crazy stunts," the ensuing conversation establishes the novel's first formal connection between Damon's cruel experiments and his reading practices.<sup>42</sup>

Although all are ignorant of Damon's former life as a student — Wright does not provide readers with the specific titles in Damon's library until Book Five (where readers learn, through the compulsive detective work of District Attorney Ely Houston, that Damon possessed texts by Jaspers, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Hegel) — each contributes to a conversation that introduces the reader to Damon's bibliomania. Beginning with pure physical description in which the men recall the ever-present "batch under his arm" and the mass of "big and little books" in the "clothes closet, bathroom, and under the bed" of his cramped apartment, the conversation moves on to the psychology behind Damon's stockpile.<sup>43</sup> Two men in the group, who go by the nicknames "Pink" and "Booker," offer insight into their friend's reading practices, which they describe as "frenetic":

But what I couldn't understand was why Cross wouldn't believe anything in the books he read. One time he was all hepped-up over one writer and the next time he was through with 'im and onto another.<sup>44</sup>

Before Damon is given a chance to respond to the above observation, his antagonistic friend Joe (whom he kills a few scenes later) follows the observation with two questions. The first, in which he asks Damon "how come [he] don't read no more," is met with deflection.<sup>45</sup> Damon, obviously dismayed by a question that so patently



calls forth his present despondence, responds defensively that “books are a thing of the past” since given up along with so many other “childish things.”<sup>46</sup> Approaching Damon with a similar question but from a different angle, Joe asks, “how come [he] was reading all them books?” Damon’s comparatively “quiet” response, that he “was looking for something” offers something much truer.<sup>47</sup>

Embedded in Damon’s answer that he “was looking for something” is the crux of Wright’s introductory provocation (in his Preface to the French edition of *The Outsider*) with which this essay opened. Like Damon, Wright studied Nietzsche, Hegel, and Heidegger, and published essays on Karl Jaspers’ philosophy, specifically his anti-totalitarian tract *The Origin and Goal of History* (1953).<sup>48</sup> Yet despite the terminological and textual connections linking Wright’s “searching” (“for an attitude to replace Marxism”) with Damon’s “looking” (for a single failsafe solution to his web of problems), theirs remain discrete and conflicting intellectual journeys. Similarities in content are disrupted by an absolute severance in method. Damon’s scattered, non-systematic reading, evidenced by his wanton embrace and disposal of philosophers based on their superficial application in a given moment — an approach that Fredric Jameson characterizes in a different context as the endless, solipsistic “pursuit of the existential traveler” — exists as a deliberate point of contrast to Wright’s scrupulous study of an interpretive process designed to help the subject understand how things work.<sup>49</sup> In contrast to Damon’s philosophical cherry picking, Wright neither “used” nor “applied” the fruits of his intellectual labor to any particular advantage, and censured those who did, including the much-beloved Black Marxist Kwame Nkrumah, at personal and political cost. Rather, his study of Marx provided him with the critical acumen and theoretical structure necessary to recast the specific conditions of his experience — including visible forms of oppression (racism, racist capitalism) to the more abstract “blind zones” of alienation that he experienced among the French Left — in an historical dialectic that paired seemingly isolated parts in a single, tyrannical system.<sup>50</sup>

The methodological disconnect between Wright and Damon is further supported by Damon’s consistent misrepresentation of Karl Marx. In an otherwise vast Marxist repertoire, Damon doesn’t read Marx. For Damon, Marx is a figure of antiquity, one consigned to museums:

Imagine the British, past masters of exploitation and duplicity, allowing a Karl Marx into their British Museum to pore over and unravel the pretensions and self-deceptions of British banditry. Such records of blatant chicanery served thoughtful and astute men as guides in the building of new, scientific and more efficient methods of deception!<sup>51</sup>

Damon’s unimaginative, and worse, unhistorical, approach to Marx as a “monument of the past” underpins his failure to recognize the present-day import of Marx’s



revolutionary theory beyond its Communist appropriations.<sup>52</sup> This particular aspect of Damon's misapprehension of Marx is supported on three other occasions in the novel in which he conflates Karl Marx with the major figures associated with Russian Bolshevism and the bureaucratic regime of the Cominform. It is "Karl Marx" who strips men of their humor, and transforms them into Bolshevik automatons.<sup>53</sup>

*The Outsider's* distinction between Marx and Marxism — and between reading and (in)citing Marx — is conceptually supported by the paradoxical thesis proposed by Étienne Balibar in *The Philosophy of Marx* (1995). When Balibar declares: "there is no Marxist philosophy and never will be, and yet Marx [remains] more important for philosophy than ever before," he troubles the "strict connection" between the philosophical and political system attributed to Marx and the form and content of Marx's work, which gains its critical edge by its very externality to either genre or system of thought.<sup>54</sup> *The Outsider* advances a similar proposal. Without abjuring Marx, Wright offers a twinned critique of philosophy without Marx (Cross Damon), and of orthodox Marxism without philosophy (the Communist Party).

Wright reserves the novel's only mention of a Marx unattached to Communist bureaucracy for Sarah Hunter, a non-aligned Black Marxist who urges her husband Bob, a Caribbean man who has been censured by the Party for organizing outside the specific directives of the Party, to leave the rank-and-file life and to "read Marx and organize" on his own.<sup>55</sup> Sarah reminds Bob that she will continue to support their family even after the Party has cut off his stipend, but he refuses to break rank, reciting a gunfire of rehearsed logical fallacies, including Lenin's loyalty to Party dogma — "A good Bolshevik obeys. Lenin obeyed, didn't he? Molotov obeys" — in order to buoy up support for his continued subordination.<sup>56</sup> Sarah, however, refuses to yield and expresses her unedited disgust with her husband's position, characterizing his passive loyalty to the Party as the weak-willed race trading of an Uncle Tom. After she has issued a final insult against his masculinity, asking him if she has married a "Marxist or a mouse," he finally accepts defeat and agrees to continue to organize beyond the scope of Party orders. Bob's refusal earns him the support and admiration of his wife and Damon, but the consequences of standing his ground (and deliberately disobeying the Party's demands that he stop organizing black workers) cost him his life. We learn secondhand that the Communist Party has double-dealt with the Office of Immigration and informed on Bob's illegal residency. As a result, Bob is deported back to Trinidad, a nation also embroiled in Cold War geopolitics, where his death is imminent.

Through the comparatively minor story of Sarah and Bob Hunter, Wright offers a utopic point of contrast to the novel's surfeit of well-worn ideological positions, including its representation of the Communist Party's plethora of ethico-political sins, the Fascist racism of Langley Herndon, and the intellectual sophistry and socio-political vacuity of Damon and District Attorney Ely Houston. Although Sarah Hunter's political integrity results in tragedy, her non-aligned Marxism is the novel's

closest approximation to Wright's own political position. Sarah's didactic speeches to her husband regarding the necessity of an unmediated approach to Marx's thought and the devolution of the Communist Party's commitment to racial equity carry the weight of Wright's own voice.<sup>57</sup> Significantly, what distinguishes Wright from Sarah Hunter is the extent to which the latter has thrown off the yoke of subjugation.

This final point brings us to our concluding question: if Wright's position is clearly beyond Damon's, if his understanding of the revolutionary import of Marx's thought is more closely aligned with the Hunters (and particularly Sarah Hunter), why the overwhelming focus on a subject position he clearly finds reprehensible? The answer to this question is twofold. First, Wright used books to work through ideas, not only those that he found "life-furthering" but those "harmful to man," those it was necessary to "fight" and "seek to destroy."<sup>58</sup> These ideas were never abstract in the sense that they were separate from lived experience. In both his literary and non-fictional work, Wright maintained a relentless focus on actually existing forms of political and psychological destruction. In *Native Son*, Wright worked through his tendentious relationship to Communism and a rudimentary form of cultural nationalism (Bigger's final conversion) linked to Stalin's Black Belt emendation through a pointed rejection of white paternalism via Bigger's murder of Mary and his dismissal of his Communist attorney Boris Max. Although aspects of the novel were misread — particularly its critical objective — the subjects of Wright's critique were relatively transparent. In *The Outsider*, the social allegory is less accessible, especially to a reader unattuned to Wright's highly individuated Marxist program. Known adversaries including the Communist Party and proponents of Fascism are present in the novel, but they make up only part of Wright's critique. Much more significant to Wright is Damon's failure to understand the contemporaneity of Marx, and specifically the sustained revolutionary potential of Marx outside the appropriation of his thought as an organizational doctrine for the Communist movement.

Second, *The Outsider* is a novel intent on proving the necessity of its own destruction. Unlike *Native Son*, which left room for the production of a liberal counternarrative in which Bigger transcends his present conditions of poverty and ignorance through educational and economic reform, *The Outsider* eliminates such provisions from consideration. Having abandoned, after *Native Son*, the "conception of the black hero proper," Wright created in Damon an allegorical figure representative of the self-destructive capacity of capitalist logic itself.<sup>59</sup> Damon self-destructs not because he lacks intellectual, social, and economic support, but because he has transformed these material sources of comfort and security into abstract concepts in which he sees no real value. In contrast to Bigger Thomas, Cross Damon not only has had access to education, but has attended a prestigious, private university and has a personal library filled with heady philosophical tomes. Though he makes bad financial decisions that involve gambling and excessive drinking, he has a steady income, a family, a lover, and friends. While some readers of influence have come to identify Damon's intellectual

prowess and cunning with the so-called fascist legacy of Marcus Garvey (Thompson), a more apt association might be with the philosopher Louis Althusser, whose strict rebuke of humanism takes on a murderous cast in Damon.<sup>60</sup>

In Damon, Wright fulfills his promise to never again create a consummate figure for bourgeois mourning, yet he stops short of producing precisely the “preachment of hate” he so vigorously denied in his defense of the ethical import of *Native Son*.<sup>61</sup> Damon’s actions reflect Marxism’s degeneration into a lethargic political philosophy animated by ideologists so cut off from grassroots activism that it ceased to be humanist in any meaningful sense of the term, but the novel ends on a redemptive note. Damon’s final words are not those of a criminal giving confession, but of a broken man indicting the desiccated intellectual culture of which he is a part:

“The search can’t be done alone,” he let his voice issue from a dry throat in which he felt death lurking. “Never alone....Alone a man is nothing.... Man is a promise that he must never break.”<sup>62</sup>

## Notes

1. Tzvetan Todorov, *The Poetics of Prose* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977).
2. All quotes attributed to Wright's introduction are from his original untranslated draft in the Richard Wright Papers, Beinecke Library, Yale University.
3. See Hazel Rowley, *Richard Wright: The Life and Times* (Chicago: U Chicago P, 2001) 198.
4. This language comes from a letter that Wright's friend, the African-American attorney Ulysses Keys, wrote to him regarding the public response in Chicago to *Native Son*. The letter is quoted in Rowley, *Richard Wright* 198.
5. See Benito Mussolini, "The Doctrine of Fascism" in *Fascism: Doctrine and Institutions* (Rome: Ardita, 1935).
6. For specifics on Wright's Marxist revision of *Native Son*, see Konstantina Karageorgos, "Richard Wright's Poetic Marxism," *Lineages of the Literary Left* (Ann Arbor: U Michigan P, forthcoming).
7. Richard Wright, "How Bigger Was Born," *Native Son* (New York: Harper & Row, 1993) 435.
8. Wright, "How Bigger Was Born" 433.
9. Quotation marks are used as shorthand to recall Wright's language for revision. "Poetic Motifs to Be Woven into Final Scene," Box 43, F. 606, Richard Wright Papers, Beinecke Library, Yale University.
10. For a thorough account of the early days of Wright's shift from Communism to Marxism, see Karageorgos, "Poetic Marxism."
11. Specific titles in his pre-1940 library included Andrei Zhdanov's *Problems of Soviet Literature: Reports and Speeches at the First Soviet Writer's Congress* by A. Zhdanov, Maxim Gorky (pseud), N. Bukharin, K. Radek, A. Stetsky (1934); Vladimir Lenin's *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism: A Popular Outline* (1917), *State and Revolution: Marxist Teaching about the Theory of the State and Tasks of the Proletariat in the Revolution* (1917), *What Is to Be Done? Burning Questions of Our Movement* (1903), and *Women in Society* (1913); Joseph Stalin's *Marxism and the National and Colonial Question: A Collection of Articles and Speeches* (1934). Texts and dates in Wright's library were scrupulously recorded by Michel Fabre in *Richard Wright: Books and Writers* (Oxford: U Mississippi P, 1990).
12. Though it may seem a minor point, Wright's selection of Wallace over Hegel runs counter to Paul Gilroy's characterization of Wright's postwar understanding of Hegel as "Kojévian." Paul Gilroy, "'Without the Consolation of Tears': Richard Wright, France, and the Ambivalence of Community," *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993) 184.
13. Michel Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright*, 2nd ed. (Urbana: U Illinois P, 1993) 163.
14. Granville Hicks, "The Portrait of a Man Searching: Richard Wright's New Novel of Violence Probes the Struggle to Understand Life," *New York Times Book Review* (22 Mar. 1953): 1.
15. Hansberry and Brown accused Wright of perpetuating the oppressive political and cultural policies maintained by Cold War regimes of power. See Lorraine Hansberry, "Untitled Review," *Freedom* 14 (April 1953): 7, and Lloyd Brown's "Outside and Low," *Masses and Mainstream* 6 (May 1953): 62-64.
16. Margaret Walker, *Richard Wright: Daemoniac Genius* (New York: Harper, 2000) 319.
17. Arna Bontemps, Review of *The Outsider* by Richard Wright *Saturday Review* (28 March 1953): 15-16.
18. See Jeffrey Attieberry, "Entering the Politics of the Outside: Richard Wright's Critique of Marxism and Existentialism," *Modern Fiction Studies* 51:4 (2005): 873-95; Gilroy, "Ambivalence of Community"; Sarah Relyea, "The Vanguard of Modernity: Richard Wright's *The Outsider*," *Outsider Citizens: The Remaking of Postwar Cultural Identity in Wright, Beauvoir, and Baldwin* (London: Routledge, 2006) 59-90; Abdul R.

JanMohamed "The Outsider: Patricidal Desires," *The Death-Bound Subject: Richard Wright's Archeology of Death* (Durham: Duke UP, 2005) 175-209.

19. Sarah Hunter, a non-aligned black Marxist, issues the novel's single reference to Marx outside the parameters of the Party. I discuss this in the essay's final section. See also "Ambivalence of Community" 170.
20. Richard Wright, *The Outsider* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2003 [1953]) 436.
21. Slavoj Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?: Five Interventions of the (Mis)Use of a Notion* (London: Verso, 2001).
22. Étienne Balibar discusses Marx's critique of the "political sociology of modern intellectuals" in *The Philosophy of Marx*, trans. Chris Turner (London: Verso, 1995). In *The German Ideology*, Marx identified professional philosophers as an oppressive class of intellectuals, or "ideologists."
23. Wright knew from extensive conversations with Simone de Beauvoir, who had spent a significant amount of time at his Charles Street apartment and had been instrumental in securing his official invitation to travel to France, the extent to which his ideas, combined with his experience, would be accepted beyond their liberal curb appeal. The exception to the French intellectual embrace of Wright came, unsurprisingly, from the *Parti communiste français* (henceforth PCF) press, who introduced Wright to its readership as a "renegade" who had already "failed" as an "authentic" Marxist ideologue even before he "deserted" the Party (Kanapa 3). Still, this criticism did not disturb Wright, who was long accustomed to the Party's rote defamations of his life and work. Jean Kanapa, "Il y a deux littératures américaines," *Les Lettres Françaises* (5 February 1948).
24. Wright, *Outsider* 4. Wright wrote "I Choose Exile" for *Ebony* magazine in 1950, but the editors refused the piece on account of its "sharp criticism of American culture and its bleak portrayal of African-American life in Chicago's South Side" (qtd. in *The Richard Wright Encyclopedia*, eds. Jerry W. Ward and Robert J. Butler [Westport: Greenwood, 2008] 192).
25. Richard Wright, "The Outsider: First Draft, Typescript, Corrected," Richard Wright Papers. Box 48 Folder 604.
26. Michel Fabre, *Richard Wright: Books and Writers* (Jackson: UP Mississippi, 1990) 325.
27. See Ian Birchall's extensive obituary for Rousset in *Revolutionary History in A Paradise for Capitalism? Class and Leadership in Twentieth-Century Belgium*, ed. Al Richardson (London: Socialist Platform, 1998).
28. Wright's rebuke of "politics proper" is one repeated throughout the forties and fifties. See *Black Power: Three Books from Exile* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008) for his pointed critique of Kwame Nkrumah's Marxist propaganda as both "politics proper" and "politics plus" and a 1955 interview in which he describes his sustained "passion for politics" as "illogical."
29. High-profile members included Simone de Beauvoir, André Breton, Albert Camus, Michel Leiris, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Jean-Paul Sartre.
30. Quoted in Ian Birchall's *Sartre Against Stalinism* (Oxford: Berghahn, 2004) 80. Similar to the CPUSA of the 1920s, the French Communist Party did little to mask its lack of concern for individuals in the African diaspora, and obviously reduced all questions of oppression to a mechanical model of class.
31. Fabre, *Richard Wright* 375.
32. For more, see Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Adventures of the Dialectic* (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1974).
33. Wright, "The Outsider: First Draft."

34. *ibid.*
35. See Sebastian Luft, "On the Future of Husserlian Phenomenology," <http://www.newschool.edu/nssr/husserl/Future/Part%20Two/Luft.html>.
36. See Paul Ricoeur's *Husserl: An Analysis of His Phenomenology* (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1967).
37. This sentence is activated by a deliberate, unmarked shift from the Kantian concept of the "thing-in-itself" to the phenomenological (originally Heideggerian) concept of "mindbody." Both posit the return to one's "primordial givenness" or "true subjectivity" as a kind of freedom.
38. Although his new set of narrative concerns would be both unpopular and misunderstood by his American readership, Wright refused to open the novel according to generic and political expectations.
39. Karl Marx, *The German Ideology*, trans. S. Ryazanskaya (Moscow: Foreign Language Publishing House, 1964) 37.
40. *Outsider* 6.
41. *Outsider* 7.
42. *Outsider* 6, 7.
43. *Outsider* 8.
44. *ibid.*
45. *ibid.*
46. *Outsider* 9.
47. *Outsider* 8.
48. Fabre, *Richard Wright* 81-82.
49. Ian Buchanan, *Jameson on Jameson: Conversations on Cultural Marxism*, ed. Ian Buchanan (Durham: Duke UP, 2007) xvi.
50. See Jameson's *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1981).
51. *Outsider* 484.
52. Balibar, "Philosophy" 1.
53. *Outsider* 242. When a joke that he has made to Communist Gil Blount has fallen flat, he blames Blount's lackluster sense of humor on his excessive Marxism.
54. "Philosophy" 1, italics original.
55. *Outsider* 258.
56. *ibid.*
57. While didactic speeches are, at this point in his writing career, a trademark of Wright's prose, Sarah Hunter is the first female character in Wright's literary corpus given a speech with such political heft.
58. Michel Fabre and Keneth Kinnamon, eds. *Conversations with Richard Wright* (Jackson: UP Mississippi, 1993) 164.
59. Fabre and Kinnamon, *Conversations* 167.
60. See Mark Christian Thompson's "Richard Wright's Jealous Rebels: Black Fascism and Philosophy" in *Black Fascisms: African American Literature and Culture Between the Wars* (U Virginia P, 2007) 143-70. In his essay, Thompson conflates Damon and Wright, and associates both with the fascism of Garvey. I completely disagree with Thompson's method and interpretive conclusions.
61. See Wright, "I Bite the Hand That Feeds Me," *Atlantic Monthly* (June 1940): 826-28.
62. *Outsider* 585.





Emilio Sauri. "Presuppositions — if I am not mistaken — of *Two Girls and Other Essays*." *Mediations* 28.2 (Spring 2015) 129-138. [www.mediationsjournal.org/articles/two-girls](http://www.mediationsjournal.org/articles/two-girls)

*Two Girls and Other Essays*

Roberto Schwarz

Francis Mulhern, Editor

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## **Presuppositions — if I am not mistaken — of *Two Girls and Other Essays***

**Emilio Sauri**

"The defining concern of Marxist criticism of literature," Roberto Schwarz notes in *Two Girls and Other Essays*, "is the dialectic of literary form and social process" (10). But what does this dialectic look like, and why should the articulation of the form of the work of art and social reality yield greater insight into not only literature but society as well? Anyone familiar with Schwarz's critical achievement as Brazil's foremost literary critic and contributor to the tradition of the Frankfurt School will recognize this as the longstanding concern of his own work as well, and this is no less true of *Two Girls*, his latest volume to appear in English.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, each of the essays included in *Two Girls* is itself a demonstration of this dialectic, which, for reasons having everything to do with Schwarz's distinctive approach, will nonetheless end up looking different every time. To many of his English-language readers, this is familiar territory, though *Two Girls* has the virtue of making concepts and reflections essential to Schwarz's literary and cultural criticism absolutely clear, even more so than the earlier works in translation, *Misplaced Ideas: Essays on Brazilian Culture* and *A Master on the Periphery of Capitalism*.<sup>2</sup> This is no doubt to Francis Mulhern's credit as editor, whose choice of texts and insightful introduction succeeds in making *Two Girls* seem less like a selection of essays than an integrated whole in which individual parts are made to speak to each other. Thus, even as its author turns his attention to concerns ranging from the classics of Brazilian literature and criticism to European modernity and its peripheries, we could say that *Two Girls* is essentially a book about the dialectic of literature and society, which, rather than merely tell us what this dialectic looks

like, makes its consequences visible on nearly every page.

Importantly, programmatic statements like the one with which we began are a rarity in his essays and books, and as Mulhern observes in his introduction, his “disdain for elaborate methodological prospectuses is of long standing, and it is in keeping that his own most focused statement of theory and method” — the essay “Objective Form: Reflections on the Dialectic of Roguery” — “should be a nuanced reflection on the work of someone else”: namely, Antonio Candido, the intellectual to whom — along with Adorno — he is most indebted (xv). Nevertheless, Schwarz’s hat tip to Candido’s “Dialética da malandragem” (1970) — an investigation of Manuel Antônio de Almeida’s satirical novel *Memoirs of a Militia Sergeant* (1852) — draws on keywords and concepts that have been central to his own literary criticism for some time now. Perhaps the most significant among these is “objective form,” a concept drawn from what Schwarz himself describes as the “tradition — itself contradictory — formed by Lukács, Benjamin, Brecht, and Adorno, and the inspiration of Marx,” and which is at play in Candido’s essay, whose originality in the context of Brazilian literary criticism stems from its attentiveness to form as it develops in relation to social processes (ix). Candido would identify that form with the uniquely Brazilian figure of the *malandro*, and demonstrate that “this form is at once the skeleton that supports the novel and the *structural reduction* of a social situation, external to literature, belonging to history,” and in this sense the “*aesthetic formalization* of a generalized rhythm in Brazilian society” (14).<sup>3</sup> Rather than see the link between literature and society in, say, the novel’s descriptions of nineteenth-century Rio de Janeiro — that is, in its content — Schwarz’s mentor had discerned a richer set of connections in the structure of the narrative — on the level of form.

Meanwhile, that structure belongs no less to reality, which, at its most fundamental level, also has a form that mediates the various elements it comprises. Or as Schwarz puts it: “the notion of form can be applied beyond the literary sphere,” for “social forms are objective; that is, created by the process of social reproduction, independent of individual consciousness” (23). Abandoning the “superficiality of documentary representation” in favor of the “mimetic value of the *composition*,” Candido not only identifies a literary form, but discovers a social structure as well, a form whose objectivity is derived from the fact that the internal laws that govern its development occurs behind the backs, so to speak, of individuals (17, emphasis in original). This is a social form Candido’s essay links to the *malandro* and a dialectic of order and disorder, both generated by Brazil’s unique historical trajectory as a slave society — in which free men, who own no property, cannot sell their labor, and therefore barely survive by means of an informal system of favors curried from patrons — and which the literary form of *Memorias* makes visible. This is a wholly original insight, and one which, importantly for Schwarz, Candido had arrived at not by way of the social sciences alone but by means of an attention to literary form. The significance of this attention thus has everything to do with this capacity to produce new knowledge,

itself the product of a refusal to conceive of the literary and the extra-literary as mere illustrations of each other. Thus, Candido's reading allows for a "bold exploration of aesthetic experience and available knowledge: reading one through the other, literature and reality, until the mediating terms are found" (21). But for Schwarz this also means that the "unification of the novelistic sphere with that of reality comes about through their almost total separation, and the dialectic of the two works through their precise articulation, and not, as usually happens, through some kind of conflation" (24). The difference here between "articulation" and "conflation" is key precisely because it insists on drawing a connection between literature and society that does not reduce the one to the other.

In this way, "Dialética de malandragem" marks the "first conceptual crystallization and historical foregrounding of a socially distinctive point of view" (20), and it doesn't take much to see that it is this same point of view that Schwarz's own literary and cultural criticism has sought to build on and amplify. This is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in his well-known studies of the nineteenth-century Brazilian novel, and particularly Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis, whose *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas* (1880) and *Dom Casmurro* (1899) become occasions for reflecting on the development of a similarly distinctive point of view in *Two Girls*. Thus, in "Beyond Universalism and Localism: Machado's Breakthrough," Schwarz associates the author's transformation from a "provincial, rather conventional writer into a world-class novelist" with a dramatic change in literary form that distinguishes a later novel like *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas* (1880) from his early work (33). Yet if Brazilian criticism, according to Schwarz, had identified this change with a realism situated between Romanticism and naturalism — a sequence of styles that repeated European literary history in Brazil — it nonetheless failed to grasp the significance of Machado's realism, which couldn't be described as realist in any conventional sense anyway. In Schwarz's terms, Machado is a "realist who works with apparently anti-realist devices," a paradox that will not only begin to explain his advance as a novelist, but also suggest "how modern forms fare in regions that do not replicate the social conditions they originated in and still in some sense presume" (34).

Machado achieves this advance in *The Posthumous Memoirs* by transposing the narrative point of view from the position of the poor to that of the upper class, and as Schwarz makes clear, this involved finding a formal solution to a problem posed by the content of his early works and by Brazilian society itself. In focusing on the ups and downs of the down-and-out, these novels revealed the "unexpected, meandering ways in which clientelism, slavery, and modernity concatenated in Brazil" (44). Yet, in adopting the viewpoint of the poor who depended on the protection and favors of landowners and the wealthy, the earlier novels nonetheless failed to compel conviction as literary works precisely because they tended to dissociate the fate of social dependents under a particularly Brazilian form of paternalism from the structure of class relations that form an essential element of society everywhere.

In contrast, *The Posthumous Memoirs* adopts the point of view of the upper class by way of its narrator, Brás Cubas, whose claims to being as enlightened and modern as his European counterparts places no restrictions on his behavior toward the poor. Thus, if this later novel brings Machado closer to what Schwarz calls “realism as the ambition to capture contemporary society in motion,” this is because moving the narrative point of view to the position of the Brazilian elite highlighted the universal class dimension of this local reality (35). That is, the extreme uncertainty social dependents faced under a system of favors that could be withdrawn just as easily as they were extended is no longer simply a product of the elite’s fickleness — a question of their attitude — but an upshot of an objective structure that makes the class difference between dependents and elites possible in the first place. Which is to say that Machado’s breakthrough has nothing to do with valuing one subject’s position or viewpoint over another, and even less so with a multiplication of perspectives aiming to offer a more complete description of Brazilian society. As Schwarz notes, “Once reality has migrated into abstract economic functions, it can no longer be read in human faces,” and while “[o]bservation of life in a former colony, where social divisions remain stark, might seem more rewarding...such concreteness is suspect too since the abstractions of the world market are never far away and belie the fullness of spontaneous perception at every moment” (35). Rather, the advance suggested by *The Posthumous Memoirs* has everything to do here with taking a thing and making it a social relation.<sup>4</sup>

Schwarz’s own achievement in this regard has been the result of suturing a national-popular consciousness to a properly historical one whose origins lie in the spatially and temporally complex processes of capitalist accumulation that give rise to centers and peripheries. This is, in other words, what Schwarz describes as the “matter of Brazil,” a “particular universe of social positions and relations” that is always implicated in these same processes — something which is no less true of individual works, even (and sometimes precisely) when a writer or artist turns his or her attention to the specific and historically unique development that Brazil names (141). For all that, this point of view always belongs to the work itself, rather than to any theory or method that presupposes it and sets about finding it a novel, and it is in this sense that Schwarz’s own approach, as Silvia López has observed, cleaves to the “basic principle of modern Marxian/Adornian aesthetics: that of the primacy of the object.”<sup>5</sup> This begins to explain Schwarz’s disdain for programmatic statements, for in contrast to a good deal of literary and cultural criticism, his engagement with literature and art consistently refuses to draw on a macro theoretical model or tools that might be applied at a more micro level to objects of interpretation; here, in good Adornian fashion, the last word is never given to anything the work might be said to exemplify. This is not to say that the work never speaks to anything beyond itself, and as Schwarz’s reflections on *Candido* already make clear, literary form can provide new knowledge about the structure of social relations because it is the aesthetic

formalization of society's own laws of motion.

This becomes all the clearer in the volume's centerpiece, *Duas meninas*, a previously untranslated study of two classics of Brazilian literature from which *Two Girls* takes its name: Machado's 1899 novel, *Dom Casmurro*, and *The Diary of "Helena Morley,"* also written during the late-nineteenth century. In a way, the difference between these texts couldn't be more obvious: *Dom Casmurro* traces the unhappy arc of Bentinho's marriage to Capitu, while *The Diary of "Helena Morley,"* comprises the mostly happy episodes in the life of an adolescent girl and her family; and while Machado's novel puts on view the specifically literary ambitions of his late works — narrated from the point of view of the jealous Bentinho, Dom Casmurro himself — Helena's diary entries lack the refinement associated with literary or artistic intent. Just the same, Schwarz demonstrates how, from a certain perspective, the lives of the fictional Capitu and the real Helena Morley speak to the question of Brazil in equal measure, revealing Helena to be "Another Capitu" and united to her fictional counterpart in intelligence and perceptiveness. As one might expect, this perspective is underwritten by Schwarz's attention to form, which, in drawing a connection between the two girls, brings to light a social system belonging to "an unexpected universe, full of abstract relations, as visible as they are unconscious" and steeped in patriarchy (97).

Turning his attention again to Machado's use of an unreliable narrator with decisively class features, Schwarz demonstrates that the author developed this point of view with half an eye to a system of relations (literary, political, economic) that extend beyond Brazil. As one would expect, his point of departure is the text itself, which demands to be read "against the grain of narration" — much like the work of Machado's contemporary, Henry James (58). In this way, *Dom Casmurro* produces an articulation of the local and the universal by way of a reversal of the novel's first section, in which Capitu successfully orchestrates her marriage to Bentinho. The union between the social dependent's daughter and the landowner's son signals the triumph of modern ideals, which Capitu gives voice to, over the backwardness of Brazilian paternalism, but this victory soon gives way to Bentinho's conviction, in the second section, that his bride has been unfaithful. This conviction subsequently casts a retrospective glance over the first section and cancels it out. Meanwhile, this neutralization is itself cancelled out by means of the narrative perspective that the novel calls into question, linking the narrator's authority to a brutal social system that modern intellectual progress fails to overcome. For Schwarz, however, Capitu's vindication will ultimately suggest that local reality could not live up to modern ideas like equality and tolerance, these too belong to a "universal model which not only prevents nothing but actually helps the property-owning patriarch to conceal his shameful interest" (91). Brazil, in other words, comes to stand for the truth of the social whole, a process of unification and totalization underlying the various links of the local and the universal, the national and the foreign, the ex-colony and the metropole that the form of the work of art makes visible.



Schwarz has long held that this is precisely what makes Machado a modern master, and, in an essay that would require its own review even to approximate the depth and reach of his analysis, describes *The Diary of "Helena Morley"* in similar terms, characterizing it as a "confirmation of Machado de Assis's project" (176). At the same time, the diary, Schwarz insists, has "no recourse to the authority of artistic specialization," and, for this reason, cannot be said to share the properly literary ambitions of a work like *Dom Casmurro* (125). For all that, the adolescent girl's account of life in the small Mineiro town offers "rather unconventional conclusions, which take the side of the real substance of things, against official, prestigious definitions," and are, in this sense, on a level with the acuity of the greatest modern writers. Observing that the diary reminds us "[t]here is nothing more instructive than the difference between a thing and its name, when the former is understood in its content and social development," Schwarz locates the very foundations of Adorno's negative dialectics — the contradiction between the thing and its concept — in the young girl's diary (133).<sup>6</sup> The countless reversals and inversions that Helena's dialectic generates when aimed at concepts like work, clientelism, race, or religion not only suggest why this reading is justified, but reach, in Schwarz's words, "an enlightened, genuinely rare understanding of the reciprocal character of social relations and the positions they define" that finds a ready equivalent in Machado's *Capitu* (117). So, while the diary is not the product of any kind of artistic specialization, these inversions nonetheless point to "a high literary ideal," one which Schwarz identifies with an organizing principle underlying the entries individually and as a whole (125). This principle, in turn, makes the diary something more than a mere collection of observations and reflections, and gives rise to a viewpoint that shares "forms and subjects" with the social structure; forms and subjects which, moreover, the essay links to *Candido's* "dialectic of order and disorder." Thus, *The Diary of "Helena Morley"* is, in Schwarz's felicitous formulation, "poetry without prior warning" (156).

The essays on *Capitu* and *Helena* are followed by a third section in which *Two Girls* takes up Francisco Alvim's collection of poems, *Elefante* (2000), and Paulo Lins' novel *City of God* (1997). Not unlike their modernist predecessors, Alvim and Lins share an intense interest in what Schwarz calls the "peculiarities of national life — its speech, its rhythms, the interactions of its people and their unspoken pacts" — though now under considerably different conditions indicative of a major historical shift (192). In Alvim's minimalism, informality serves as a "principle of selection," which, at the same time, finds its origins in the "social fracture" that gives rise to the precarious position of the Brazilian poor and their disenfranchisement, as well as their only means of survival (215, 208). But while such informality had already served Brazilian modernism well as a means toward imagining the integration of the country's masses into a national-popular project — Schwarz reminds us of Mário de Andrade pronoun usage in *Macunaíma* (1928) — such integration, as Alvim's poetry suggests, no longer

remains the order of the day. Meanwhile, this state of affairs and its devastating consequences are made all the clearer in Lins' *City of God*, in which the repetitive cycles of drugs, crime, and violence that plague one of Rio's larger favelas highlights the "inescapable nature of our times" (226). The "our" here is important, for while the explosion in surplus populations living in Latin America's favelas, *villas miserias*, and *ciudades perdidas* — what Schwarz, following Roberto Kurz calls "monetary subjects without cash" — would appear to signal the disintegration of society, Lins and Alvim both suggest something of the opposite: namely, that "[t]heir world is our own" (234).<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the attention given to the persistence of such forms of exclusion from the nineteenth century to the present (and beyond?) not only creates a thread that runs through *Two Girls*, and much of Schwarz's criticism more generally, but also gives the impression — confirmed by Marx — that these are products of wider and more global tendencies within capitalist society itself.

Bookended by a brief reflection on Kafka's story "Worries of a Family Man" from 1966 and a longer and more recent essay on Brecht's relevance (originally translated for *Mediations*), *Two Girls* also offers Anglophone readers a more complete sense of his wide-ranging interests. Yet, even here, modernism and the historical avant-garde are read with half an eye on Brazil, shedding new light on core societies, their peripheral counterparts, and the processes that bring them together. Hence, the relevance of Kafka's brief narrative to the centers of the world-system and peripheral countries alike: for what is Brazil if not the truth of the family man himself? Schwarz writes, "If in a capitalist society, production for the market permeates the social order as a whole, then concrete forms of activity cease to have their justifications in themselves"; in contrast, Odradek "has no purpose (that is, no external end), but he is in his own way complete; he embodies his end...in himself" (6-7). For this reason, what seems unimportant and inessential from the perspective of the family man becomes "the precise and logical construction of the negation" of the very "bourgeois life" for which he stands (7). Considering it appeared in *O Estado de São Paulo* only two years after the 1964 military coup, the essay is also a coded message of sorts, for nothing in Brazil embodied the logic of the bourgeois order or the violence of what Schwarz calls Kafka's "unacknowledged partisan of destruction" more than the dictatorship and its defense of "tradition, family, and property" (9). Thus, if "Worries of a Family Man" is, for Schwarz, "a minor masterpiece" it is because, in holding up a mirror to capitalist society as a whole, it becomes a way of talking about Brazil, thereby underlining the degree to which both are made possible by a threat of violence with a particular class character (5). The military coup, in turn, emerges here as the genuine face or logical endpoint of that same society, now shorn of any pretension to civility associated with Kafka's urbane family man. Meanwhile, the very thing the family man regards as an offense to his existence — namely, Odradek — ultimately finds an equivalent of sorts in that which the military government would eventually treat as a threat — culture.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, to the extent that Odradek has "no external end," occupying the "social place

of a reconciled life” that “cannot be named on the map of bourgeois society,” he is also a placeholder for the realization of the artwork’s promise of autonomy.<sup>9</sup> In this sense, culture, like Odradek, contains the seeds of that society’s destruction, and in the context of 1960s Brazil, the promise of overcoming the dictatorship.

But while the Brazilian military coup eventually ceded to democratization in the 1980s, the negation of capitalist society remains a long way off, appearing even to have been placed indefinitely on hold. As Schwarz’s essay on Brecht reminds us, the 1980s also marked capital’s victory in Brazil and the further ideological closure of the market’s horizon abroad. Nevertheless, if this new world order posed unfamiliar challenges that the Left in Brazil and elsewhere continues to struggle with today, “Brecht’s Relevance — Highs and Lows” also shows that reflection on art’s relation to politics can yield greater insight into the contemporary movement of society worldwide. As one of the foremost practitioners and theorists of this relationship, Brecht devoted much of his work as playwright and critic to the question of how aesthetic ambition and political conviction might be articulated, prioritizing one over the other whenever necessary. “The usefulness of the Brechtian spirit for the Third World Left,” Schwarz notes, “is easy to understand,” given the “linking of language and literature to a programme of collective experimentation of all sorts.” In this way, Brazil’s social and historical situation conferred a new significance to Brechtian experimentation, “freeing literary modernism from mere scribbling,” while occasioning “certain incongruities, since the 1920s were not the 1960s, nor was Germany Brazil” (241-42).

At the same time, Schwarz also notes that “artistic methods have presuppositions that are not themselves artistic: the beginning of the end of communism, as well as new features of capitalism, affected the credibility of Brecht’s theatrical technique” (244). Tracking Brecht’s relevance within Brazilian theater, film, and music during the dictatorship and following democratization thus becomes a way of tracing the fate of the Left in Brazil to transformations in the political configuration of the world economic system as well. These presuppositions, however, also point to a world in which capital has ostensibly given up the ideological smokescreen Brechtian didacticism sought to dissolve, while the decisively radical aims of his avant-garde techniques like estrangement and its attack on the institution of art are put to more conservative ends. Or as Schwarz puts it: “The Brechtian focus on the material infrastructure of ideology...has become a standard feature of TV newscasts, functioning as a prop for the authority of capital, rather than a critique,” just as “[e]conomic determinism has switched sides and functions as an explicit ideology of the dominant classes, a justification for social inequality” (245, 258). From this perspective, Brecht’s relevance is as much a question about the relevance of Marxism today.

But if such world-systemic change would suggest Brecht’s political-aesthetic positions are, at best, outdated and, at worst, obfuscating, Schwarz demonstrates how an attention to the literary-artistic qualities of a play like *Saint Joan of the Stockyards*

confers on Brechtian drama an entirely new relevance. Drawing out the play's allusions to the German classical tradition, including Goethe and Hölderlin, Schwarz offers an ingenious reading in which the political dimension of the playwright's virtuosity lies not in a demystification of bourgeois society that would reveal economic exploitation as its dirty little secret, but in its structural reduction of a social situation at the level of form. "The coupling of lyrical-philosophical pastiche to the brutalities of economic competition" in *Saint Joan* draws "cultural excellence and the standpoint of the working class" into the same social whole. In this way, "the realities of work and unemployment, hunger and cold, organized struggle and military massacre are presented in direct and decisive reciprocity with the strategies of capital, with aesthetic conventions and economic theories," as well as "with the new means of production" (256).

This is a process of unification and totalization that belongs to history itself, and which pertains just as much to Brecht's world as it does to the "inescapable nature of our times." This is also a process that poses historically unique challenges for which the same solutions don't always apply, something which makes the question Schwarz poses in the title of an earlier book — *What time is it?* (1987) — all the more significant.<sup>10</sup> Yet, the essays gathered in *Two Girls* offer no program, powerfully demonstrating instead how reflection on the literary might guide us toward asking the right kinds of questions of both literature and society, and how these invite us to ask not only *What is to be done?* but also — and sometimes more importantly — *Que horas são?*

## Notes

1. For an overview of Schwarz's intellectual formation, see Maria Elisa Cevasco's excellent "The São Paulo Fraction: The Lineaments of a Cultural Formation," *Mediations* 28.1 (Fall 2014): 75-104 [www.mediationsjournal.org/articles/sao-paulo-fraction](http://www.mediationsjournal.org/articles/sao-paulo-fraction); Neil Larsen offers key insights into the significance of Schwarz's contributions to critical theory in "Roberto Schwarz: A Quiet (Brazilian) Revolution in Critical Theory," *Determinations: Essays on Theory, Narrative and Nation in the Americas* (London: Verso Books, 2001): 75-82.
2. Roberto Schwarz, *Misplaced Ideas: Essays on Brazilian Culture* (London: Verso Books, 1992), and *A Master on the Periphery of Capitalism*, trans. John Gledson (Durham: Duke UP, 2001).
3. As Schwarz explains, the *malandro* (which has often been translated in English as "rogue"), is a "figure conjoining the legendary trickster, the historic satirical style of the Regency, and a movement in which is transposed a historical dynamic of national significance (the comings and goings between the hemispheres of social order and disorder)" (19).
4. This has everything to do, in other words, with articulating what the Hegelian-Marxian tradition identifies as a standpoint, a logical position within a system of relations that is not reducible to a point of view or subject-position. Machado's breakthrough, in this sense, is the creation of a narrative point of view that is itself an aesthetic formalization of an objective system of relations.
5. Silvia López, "Dialectical Criticism in the Provinces of the 'World Republic of Letters': the Primacy of the Object in the Work of Roberto Schwarz," *A Contracoreinte* 9.1 (Fall 2011) 70.
6. See Adorno's *Lectures on Negative Dialectics* (Cambridge: Polity, 2008), where he explains, for example, "for dialectical thought in the sense in which the category of contradiction is central, what is needed is the structure of the concept and the relation of the concept to the thing it stands for" (8).
7. See Schwarz's review of Kurz's *The Collapse of Modernization*, "An Audacious Book," *Mediations* 27.1-2 (Fall/Spring 2013-14): 401-406, [www.mediationsjournal.org/articles/audacious-book](http://www.mediationsjournal.org/articles/audacious-book).
8. See Schwarz's own minor masterpiece, "Culture and Politics in Brazil: 1964-1969," in *Misplaced Ideas*. Here, Schwarz observes, "Having broken the links between the cultural movement and the masses, the Castelo Branco government made no attempt to prevent the circulation of doctrinal or artistic left-wing material, which flourished to an extraordinary extent, albeit within a restricted area. With its ups and downs, the ingenious solution lasted until 1968, when a new group, capable of supplanting their ideology with practical strength, emerged: the students, who were organized in semi-clandestine manner.... In 1964 it had been possible for the right to 'preserve' cultural expression, since it had only been necessary to eliminate all contacts with the working masses in cities and rural areas; in 1968, when students and those who enjoyed the best films, the best theater, the best music, and the best books had become a politically dangerous group, it would become necessary for teachers, producers, authors, musicians, books, publishers to be replaced or censored — in other words, the active culture of the moment would have to be eliminated" (127-28).
9. Nicholas Brown elaborates on this point — and on Schwarz's reading of Brecht as well — in "Kurt Weill, Caetano Veloso, White Stripes," *nonsite.org*, *Issue #10: Affect, Effect, Bertolt Brecht* (Fall 2013) <http://nonsite.org/article/kurt-weill-caetano-veloso-white-stripes>.
10. Roberto Schwarz, *Que horas são?* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (São Paulo: Companhia Das Letras, 2006).

Paul Stasi. "Georg Lukács Reconsidered." *Mediations* 28.2 (Spring 2015) 139-51.

[www.mediationsjournal.org/articles/lukacs-reconsidered](http://www.mediationsjournal.org/articles/lukacs-reconsidered)

*Georg Lukács Reconsidered: Critical Essays in Politics, Philosophy, and Aesthetics*

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## Georg Lukács Reconsidered

Paul Stasi

What are we to make of the work of Georg Lukács today? On one hand, his Marxism seems irredeemably idealist, discovering the proletariat through the abstractions of Hegelian logic rather than a strict attention to political reality. On the other hand, his politics seem hopelessly compromised through his adherence to party discipline and Stalinist orthodoxy. Too idealist and yet not idealist enough, Lukács is a quintessentially untimely figure. Intellectually, his central category of totality — the “essence of the method which Marx took over from Hegel” — has been the centerpiece of poststructuralist and post-Marxist attacks on identity thinking, while his often-reductive and prescriptive aesthetics advance a reflection theory of art tied to a representational theory of knowledge long since overthrown.<sup>1</sup> Committed to the progressive values of the Enlightenment, reason and truth, Lukács would appear to have no home in the contemporary world of theoretical skepticism.

History, too, could be said to have passed him by. The disappearance of the Soviet Union and the manifest absence of a world proletariat can make his political commitments seem quaint or old-fashioned, part of the nineteenth-century social formation out of which he emerged, even as movements such as Occupy Wall Street openly disavow the party politics to which Lukács was dedicated. While it is, perhaps, a stretch to say, as Michael J. Thompson does in his engaging edited volume *Georg Lukács Reconsidered: Critical Essays in Politics, Philosophy, and Aesthetics*, that Lukács’s writings “have fallen into almost total neglect,” it is nevertheless true that he is remembered more as the untimely figure sketched above than as a thinker with any contemporary relevance (1).



Nevertheless, the very forces that make him seem irrelevant are those that reveal ourselves to be most in need of his lifelong “hatred and contempt” towards the bourgeoisie and their forms of economic domination — prime among them reification and that “central, structural problem of capitalist society in all aspects,” the commodity form — even as his understanding of the crisis as the moment when the apparent fragmentation of the capitalist social order gives way to the totality that lies beneath finds objective confirmation in the daily news of a tottering world economic system.<sup>2</sup> The dominance of capitalism only makes Lukács’s thought more, rather than less, relevant. Indeed, to argue that the fall of the Soviet Union invalidates Lukács’s critique is to adhere to a kind of vulgar determinism, one that believes in such a tight link between thought and historical moment as to imagine that that thought’s force disappears when history changes. Just as the progressive heritage of the bourgeoisie was something Lukács believed could help guide the transformation of the present, even as it was tied entirely to the historical conditions out of which it emerged, so too could Lukács’s thought help us navigate our contemporary capitalist world, despite its obvious relationship to his own social order.

Here we can follow the lead of Lukács himself who, somewhat scandalously, proclaimed that even if “recent research had disproved once and for all every one of Marx’s individual theses,” Marxism would necessarily survive due to the power of its method.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, I would like to suggest that Lukács’s method is what remains, despite the obvious fact that the course of events has outstripped his ability to perceive them. The key to this method is the elucidation of the links between abstract philosophical thinking and the historical situations it seeks to understand. For historical forms, including philosophical thought, by their very nature have an innate tendency towards reification. If we believe, along with Lukács, that intellectual formations arise due to the needs of a particular time, they nevertheless persist past the time of their making, and in this way court reification. This reification can, however, “be overcome only by constant and constantly renewed efforts to disrupt the reified structure of existence by concretely relating to the concretely manifested contradictions of the total development.”<sup>4</sup> The overcoming of reification, that is to say, requires the continual confrontation of form with historical content.<sup>5</sup> What prevents us from understanding Lukács, then, is less history itself than the reified modes of intellectual justification recent history has produced: prime among them poststructuralism or, as Fredric Jameson once helpfully put it, the cultural logic of late capitalism. For a contemporary Left that speaks the language of barred subjects, absent centers, and historical rupture remains trapped in the contentless form of contemplative consciousness Lukács spent a lifetime decrying.

Something like this point is made in Thompson’s introduction, which takes as its starting point the continued necessity of Lukács’s particular form of ideology critique. Thompson wastes no time in getting to the heart of his argument:

Today, with futility, an atrophied left searches for ethical and political coherence in writers such as Slavoj Žižek, Alain Badiou, and others that epitomize the essence of what Lukács saw as the great pathology of modern thought: the detachment of consciousness from its social and material context. A genuinely radical politics requires a rational confrontation with the mechanisms of the modern social order, and Lukács was consistent in seeing the material base that leads to an exaggerated subjectivity and its concurrent irrationalism as well as the political and ethical motivational paralysis that results from its reifying tendencies. (1)

Eschewing fashionable forms of post-Marxism, Thompson's volume makes a simple claim: "In the face of postmodernism and poststructuralism — themselves simply expressions of an irrationalism that could have been taken straight from the pages of Lukács's *Destruction of Reason* — as well as an ascendant capitalism and neo-liberal ideology, we are faced once again with constructing a radical yet coherent alternative to the present social order" (7). This alternative, for Thompson, is "a humanist ethical tradition with an objective understanding of social reality," which his volume seeks to ground in Lukács's philosophical writings (7).

Curiously, given the focus of the introduction, there is little direct engagement with the various ideologies that have come between us and Lukács. Nor is there, with few exceptions, any sustained attempt to reconstruct Lukácsian categories in light of present-day events. Instead what we find are a series of readings of Lukács's writings that work against the dominant caricature of his thinking, disclosing agency where we have tended to find determinism, and shedding new light on questions of form, subjectivity, and, above all, reification. What emerges is a figure whose lifelong concern was with the fundamentally philosophical problem of how to actualize human freedom within the unfree world of commodity capitalism.

In what follows, I will suggest that this problem should be understood less as part of Thompson's "humanist ethical tradition" than as a critique of that same tradition from the famous "standpoint of the proletariat." For whether analyzing Hegel or the novels of Walter Scott, Lukács always proceeds from a partisan perspective, one that refuses transcendental formalism in the name of proletarian interest, even if it most often articulates this interest as being coterminous with that of humanity itself. Ultimately, I will argue that this notion of historically determined interest might be the best weapon Lukács offers us to fend off both the contentless reifications of contemporary Leftist theory and the supposedly neutral structures of our neoliberal capitalist order. To make this point, I would like to turn first to Lukács's early essay "Tactics and Ethics" to understand exactly what ethics meant for the young Lukács, before returning to examine the essays in Thompson's volume in light of this analysis.

### Tactics and Ethics

Written in 1919 at the time of Lukács's conversion to Marxism, "Tactics and Ethics" reveals the continuity between his early "romantic anti-capitalist" works, written under the aegis of Simmel and Weber, and his later Marxist classics. The basic outlines of the piece are clear: it seeks to square the ethics of individual action with the tactics required by a collective revolutionary movement within a Marxist philosophy of history. The Kantian dilemmas of is and ought, necessity and freedom, are thus reframed in terms of the revolutionary struggle, making the essay a relatively obvious thematization of Lukács's newfound Marxist commitments. What is compelling about the essay, however, is less the continuity it displays between the two halves of a career typically understood to be quite distinct from each other, but rather the ways it tries, but does not quite succeed, in suturing this gap. The seams in Lukács's argument are as instructive as its conclusions, revealing the necessary impossibility of that great intellectual dream: the unity of theory and practice, fact and value. In doing so, Lukács suggests the fundamental limits of a purely philosophical approach to the problem of creating a just social order, as the ideal of a transcendent ethics gives way to the historically determined content of the proletarian revolution.

Lukács begins by distinguishing the goals of socialism from what he disparagingly calls utopian revolutions. Socialism, he declares, "is anything but utopian in the sense that its attainment would entail the absorption of ideas hovering outside or above society."<sup>6</sup> Dropping into Hegelian language, he argues that because "the Marxist theory of class struggle...changes the transcendent objective into an immanent one...the class struggle of the proletariat is at once the objective itself and its realization."<sup>7</sup> Here we encounter, for the first time, the conceptual problem that emerges so forcefully in *History and Class Consciousness*, as it seems as if knowledge alone creates an objective change in the social order. A similar view emerges from the following quotation:

The sense of world history determines the tactical criteria, and it is before history that he who does not deviate for reasons of expediency from the narrow, steep path of correct action prescribed by the philosophy of history, which alone leads to the goal, undertakes responsibility for *all* his deeds.<sup>8</sup>

We find ourselves, here, in the world of Hegelian telos as Lukács seems content to rest with the contemplative consciousness he will spend much of *History and Class Consciousness* denouncing. Tactical criteria are decided by *the philosophy of history alone*. And yet, at the same time, Lukács claims that "it is never possible to know in advance which tactical step will succeed in achieving the ultimate objective."<sup>9</sup> We have arrived at an aporia, for there is a correct path to follow, and yet it remains impossible to ascertain. On one hand, ethics — which Lukács claims "has no meaning except in relation to the individual" — have been eviscerated due to the objective correctness

of history's path.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, tactical arguments are made irrelevant. If we can never know the outcome of our action in advance, despite its being latent in our historical moment, then what criteria would allow us to choose one path over another?

Sensing this problem, Lukács renews his inquiry, disclosing something like a Kantian categorical imperative repurposed for revolutionary aims. The individual, he argues, "must act as if on his action or inaction depended the changing of the world's destiny."<sup>11</sup> Each individual is therefore responsible for all the actions undertaken in the name of communism, should she choose the path of revolution, or for all the evils brought about by capitalism, should she abdicate. Thus ethics, for Lukács, virtually requires an awareness of tactics; the acting subject "must know under what circumstances and how he acts."<sup>12</sup> Lukács continues, "for every socialist, then, morally correct action is related fundamentally to the correct perception of the given historico-philosophical situation, which in turn is only feasible through the efforts of every individual to make this self-consciousness conscious for himself."<sup>13</sup> Morally correct action becomes a problem of "ethical self-awareness," the realization that "only he who acknowledges unflinchingly and without any reservations that murder is under no circumstances to be sanctioned can commit the murderous deed that is truly — and tragically — moral."<sup>14</sup> The moral individual "sacrifices his inferior self on the altar of the higher idea."<sup>15</sup> And that higher ideal, of course, is socialism.

There are two important ideas I wish to tease out of this argument. The first is the way in which Lukács understands the ethical act not as something that adheres to a set of transcendent principles but rather as something coterminous with tactical or pragmatic aims. The ethical act, for Lukács, is one undertaken in order to realize the principles of socialism. And since these principles are the "means whereby humanity liberates itself," they necessarily transcend the realm of individual action.<sup>16</sup> Ethics, then, is no longer conceived as a normative realm that guides individual action, but rather as a realm of interest. The ethical act requires the sacrifice of the individual for the collective good in an individual act that mirrors the larger historical goal it seeks to attain: namely, the realization of a socialist world understood as the overcoming of individual interest in the name of our common humanity.

We can see here, quite clearly, how Lukács must have understood the various compromises his lifelong party membership required of him: as a sacrifice of his own moral purity in the name of a higher ethical good. Objectively we can say that history has proven Lukács wrong. He chose Stalin, and Stalin did not succeed in liberating humanity. But what of those who, out of principle, rejected the Soviet Union? They, too, it would seem, have failed to achieve the liberation of humanity. If Lukács has, on his conscience, the blood of all those murdered in Stalin's name, the rest of us presumably "bear the same individual responsibility for the destruction entailed" by imperial capital.<sup>17</sup> We seem to have found the desired unity of theory and practice, as individual acts find their place within the larger movement of history.

Nevertheless, as we have seen, this larger movement remains necessarily opaque to the individuals situated within it, and here we come to the second, and perhaps more important issue the essay raises. For what Lukács's failure to achieve a satisfactory resolution to his dilemma at the level of abstract argumentation shows us is the *limitations of philosophy itself*. Philosophy can never know, in advance, the movement of history. Theory is thus no substitute for practice, even as practice cannot proceed without theory. The two are constitutive of one another in a dialectic that cannot be synthesized: practice guided by a theory that will necessarily be rethought in light of the outcomes of this practice.<sup>18</sup> Another way to think about reification, then, is as a misunderstanding of this dialectic, either through an undue emphasis on one of its constitutive parts or as the imagined reconciliation of what are, and must remain, irreconcilable levels of social reality.

### Reification and Form

Lukács's work, of course, often seems to artificially resolve this dialectic in favor of one side or the other, a fact which produces the split in the critical reception between the Hegelian and the Stalinist (even if thinkers such as Althusser believe the two to be one and the same). Divided into three sections — "Lukács's Philosophical Legacy," "Extending Aesthetic Theory," and "Perspectives on Critical Theory" — Thompson's volume combats this reception by treating Lukács as a serious philosophical thinker, one whose work cannot simply be dismissed by its adherence to either an outdated philosophical system or a historically superseded politics. However, in spending the majority of its time correcting misunderstandings of Lukács's work through close attention to textual argumentation, the volume often courts the very reification of philosophical categories Lukács worked strenuously to overcome.

The first section focuses primarily on the place of subjectivity within Lukács's theory of historical action. Stephen Eric Bronner's "Lukács and the Dialectic: Contributions to a Theory of Practice" provides a helpful overview of the precise innovations *History and Class Consciousness* made to the Marxist theory that preceded it, prime among them the shift from understanding Marxism as a science to conceiving of it as a "critical method" that must be subjected to history (16). According to Bronner, "consciousness of freedom and the ability to act as a historical agent" become the key terms for a reimagined Marxism. Michael Lowy, similarly, finds in a reading of *Tailism and the Dialectic* — Lukács's long-unpublished defense of *History and Class Consciousness* — that "the key element" in Lukács's "polemical battle is [his] emphasis on the *decisive revolutionary importance of the subjective moment in the subject/object historical dialectics*" (68). In the same vein, Stanley Aronowitz, via a somewhat Sisyphean defense of Lukács's *Defense of Reason*, describes its scathing critique of Nietzschean philosophy's inability to conceive of "genuine historical transformation" (60).

These arguments will not surprise those steeped in Lukács's work, but they do provide a powerful counter to the dominant view of Lukács as a historical determinist.



At the same time, this investment in the subject and its philosophical derivations risks occluding the specificity of the capitalist world that was always Lukács's object of critique, while at the same time overstating the importance of the subject that the capitalist world produces. This issue emerges most clearly in Tom Rockmore's essay "Lukács and the Recovery of Marx after Marxism." Arguing that Marxism "consists in denigrating Hegel and philosophy in general, which it links to modern capitalism," Rockmore insists that Lukács discovers, instead, a "post-Marxist interpretation of Marx," one whose "main source is Fichte's theory of the subject as active" (34, 48). Thus, "Marx's theory is finally not centered only on human being in capitalism, which is an aspect, even a central aspect, but finally no more than an aspect of the deeper problem of the self-development of human being as human in and through human activity in a social context" (47). Not entirely false, this statement nevertheless reveals the bias of a philosopher who decides that the philosophical problem is "deeper" than the social one. No doubt many who read this volume will not share Rockmore's view, despite the impressive way in which he discloses Lukács's debt to Fichte and Hegel.

A similar problem can be seen in the collection's second section concerning aesthetics. Here we find essays on the relationship between Adorno's and Lukács's competing notions of realism, the place of time within Lukács's conception of literary form, the "poetic strength of thought" Lukács disclosed within Dante, Goethe, and the Hungarian writer Imre Madách, and, finally, an analysis of the "premodern political ethics" of Walter Scott's clan novels (116, 128). Each of these essays is not without insight, however they tend to confine themselves to readings of the individual texts under consideration without much attention to the implications these readings might have for either their historical moment or our contemporary concerns.

A brief comparison with Timothy Bewes's and Timothy Hall's companion volume — *Georg Lukács: The Fundamental Dissonance of Existence: Aesthetic, Politics, Literature*, also published by Continuum in 2011 — is instructive in this regard.<sup>19</sup> While Norman Arthur Fischer's essay, in the volume under review, promises to describe "The Modern Meaning of Georg Lukács's Reconstruction of Walter Scott's Novels of Premodern Political Ethics," this meaning seems to consist primarily in the idea of "fusion" — a "measure of the extent and nature of the identification that a character...has with the larger ethical and political goals, problems, and feelings of their time" (131). Thus Scott's premodern novels succeed in generating characters tied to their premodern social world. This argument is persuasive enough, but what exactly it has to do with the contemporary world is unclear. Taking up a similar topic, John Marx's "The Historical Novel After Lukács," published in Bewes's and Hall's volume, analyzes the "forms of assemblage" present in Scott's premodern novels that "exacerbate heterogeneity from the contrasting containment of the heterogeneous that [Lukács] associates with bourgeois nationalism."<sup>20</sup> These forms of assemblage then reappear in contemporary novels such as Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*, allowing us to see how we might take Lukács's categories and apply them to contemporary literature.



Similarly, while Peter Uwe Hohendahl is certainly right to note that both Adorno and Lukács “understand the novel...as a literary form defined by the social and economic conditions of modernity” (91), David Cunningham’s essay on “Capitalist and Bourgeois Epics” fills in this claim with content, arguing that what distinguishes the novel is its ability to make “visible the irresolvable gap between the forms of abstraction intrinsic to modern social being and...the concreteness of ‘things’ and of individual experience.”<sup>21</sup> In these two examples, we can see how the essays in Thompson’s volume might have benefited from the extension of their textual and philosophical arguments out into the world or practice.<sup>22</sup>

Such an extension finally occurs in the volume’s last, and therefore strongest section: the one concerning critical theory. Here we find powerful reconsiderations of two key Lukácsian terms: form and reification. Taking up Lukács’s early work *Soul and Form*, Katie Terezakis discloses the social nature of form, as it concerns both artist and critic:

By imposing form, an individual articulates the relationships that lay claim on her or him; by interpreting form, the critic discloses the dynamics of meaningful dependencies and contests of authority, personal and ideological. Thus for both the maker of form and the reader of form, the animation and logic of human relationships is the fundamental concern. (219)

This realization, in turn, leads to a ringing critique of contemporary academic and critical practices, which entirely ignore the “deteriorating conditions” of the contemporary university that exist alongside the ever-present pressure to publish. This critique is worth quoting at length:

A contemporary aesthetic criticism which ignores this context neglects its own conditions of entitlement, and thus its ability to speak meaningfully from within the tide of productivity-for-productivity’s sake. For in the university culture within which the contemporary critic must live, the emphasis is on full capacity production, regardless of need or use. And that this should be considered par for the course, that frenzied production and the quantifiable standards of academic success based upon it should be considered natural and fair, without consideration of the social conditions of production and its significant effects, is the very definition of fetishism. (224)

The academic subject’s consciousness here is as reified as any other, the “reification of consciousness,” as Hohendahl argues, applying “not only to factory labor but equally to science and philosophy” (87). In a precise analogy to Lukács’s historicization of

the novel form, Terezakis concludes by claiming that a historicization of academic labor through an understanding of its historically conditioned *form* becomes a way to overcome its reification.

A similar point is made in Andrew Feenberg's essay "Reification and Its Critics." Disclosing a theory of mediation Lukács himself only partly articulated, Feenberg claims that "human action in modern societies, whether capitalist or socialist, continually constructs reified social objects out of the underlying human relations on which it is based" (185). Reification is, thus, a problem of modernity that would persist in any future socialist world. "The chief difference," Feenberg concludes, "between capitalism and socialism is not that the one is reified and the other entirely free of reification, but rather that one stands or falls with reification while the other can support a continual mediating and transforming of reified social objects in order to realize the potential of those sacrificed dimensions" (185). As we saw earlier, what is important here is the continuous nature of the dialectic, as reified objects are mediated through a notion of historical totality that must itself be continually reimagined in the light of historical action. The overcoming of reification is not, then, something that occurs once and for all. It is rather a process, even as totality in Lukács is, according to Jameson, best understood as a method.<sup>23</sup>

The volume's remaining essays best exemplify this method, largely through a critique of the ways in which Lukács's theories have been modified by Jürgen Habermas and, most recently, Axel Honneth. Thompson provides, perhaps, the sharpest statement of the distinction between contemporary critical theory and Lukács. With Habermas,

We are concerned with a moral philosophy which is epistemological and intersubjective, but removed from the concern with the ways in which social power is constituted by institutional logics grounded in capitalist economic life. The initial starting point of critical theory has now been eclipsed. (235)

Konstantinos Kavoulakos makes a similar claim: "Habermas has already drawn in his moral philosophy a clear distinction between universalizable *moral norms* and *values* or *conceptions of the good*, which are tied up with a context-bound form of life and are, consequently, relative. The task of the philosopher is reduced to a reconstruction of the necessary and universal presuppositions of the discursive validation of norms" (153). Honneth's theory of recognition ends up with a similar problem. Failing to deal "effectively with the crucial problem of the *critical evaluation of the concrete contents of a form of life*," his moral world remains entirely formal (155). Lukács, however, as Timothy Hall suggests, attempted to "ground a critical theory of society in the concept of praxis," one in which "ethical value" would not be understood as "separated from the material conditions of society" (201, 243). Indeed, the latter is the very definition

of reification, which it was the task of the proletariat to overcome.

In contemporary thought this reification is most visible as the reification of difference, shorn of any historical or social content. As Kavoulakos notes, contemporary critiques of “historico-philosophical reflection...imbued as they are with the historicist spirit of ‘multiculturalism’...dismiss any other universality beyond the universality of difference. They are forced thus to translate urgent substantive demands...into the vocabulary of human rights. In this way, however, they lose sight of the wider social dimensions of these problems” (151). Several issues coincide here. The first is the link between the contemporary fetish of difference — as pronounced in poststructuralist thought as it is in the politics of multiculturalism — and the abstractions of human rights discourse. The second concerns the belief in a universal history which contemporary post-Marxist thinkers tend to find so reprehensible in Lukács’s writings, preferring instead irreconcilable differences, resistant particulars, and dominance without hegemony.<sup>24</sup> These concepts, though, are best understood as reifications of today’s contemporary neoliberal order, which thinks of itself in terms of flows and flexible capital and, in doing so, tends to hide its own concentration of power in the “neutral” discourse of markets and finance. This neutrality is, of course, only a contemporary version of Lukács’s contemplative consciousness, which reduces the human subject to the observer of a set of mechanical laws which exist outside of that subject and her historical grounding. It is easy to observe here both the historical determinism of vulgar Marxism and the absent center of contemporary post-Marxism, dialectical opposites finding their unity with the capitalist world they each imagine themselves to oppose.

In contrast, Lukács represents a strong form of partisanship, most visible in his much-maligned distinction between imputed and empirical consciousness. Often understood — even by Lukács himself — to be a philosophical sleight of hand, this distinction, in fact, represents one of Lukács’s greatest theoretical interventions. For it, too, produces a dialectical reversal of a powerful kind. Empirical consciousness, presumably meant to be objective, is, in fact, subjective, prone to all the ideological distortions to which humans are prey, while imputed consciousness, itself entirely a philosophical construction, names a knowledge tied irredeemably to the social order. Imputed consciousness, that is to say, is the objective moment in the dialectic of thought and social ground. By casting his lot with imputed consciousness Lukács is suggesting, first of all, that “the standpoint of the proletariat” is not an empirical category tied to one’s identity. It rather names a structural feature of social reality. For class, as E.P. Thompson told us long ago, is a social relation, one that is transpersonal, and it thus belongs to a different order of reality than those other identities of race, gender, and sexuality with which it is falsely united.

Class, that is to say, is not subsumable to a multicultural politics built on difference and the importance of subjective identity. Nor can it fall prey to the neutrality of bourgeois liberalism. Instead, a class standpoint is necessarily partisan:

The objective reality of social existence is *in its immediacy* ‘the same’ for both proletariat and bourgeoisie. But this does not prevent the *specific categories of mediation* by means of which both classes raise this immediacy to the level of consciousness, by which the merely immediate reality becomes for both the authentically objective reality, from being fundamentally different.<sup>25</sup>

Austerity, for instance, means something fundamentally different to those who impose it than to those on whom it is imposed, a differential understanding of the world born out of distinct experiences. If all perspectives are interested, then, it makes no sense not to choose one. In another striking dialectical reversal, Lukács seems more true to the Nietzsche he hated — whose basic insight was to see the interested nature of all ostensibly disinterested discourses — than to those contemporary post-Marxists for whom Nietzsche is an inspiration. Nietzsche may have been on the side of the aristocrats, but at least he understood the partisan nature of the struggle.

The importance of the proletariat, then, transcends their particular presence in the world. To be sure, we must not be too hasty to jettison this category altogether, as millions of Chinese citizens are being turned into factory-working proletarians, while the absence of factories in the supposedly post-industrial West is only the latest manifestation of class warfare rather than a reason to imagine its absence. Indeed the transfer of wealth upwards in society has increased dramatically in the last ten, if not thirty years, and the need to disclose the partisan nature of our social reality has only become more urgent.

To speak of the relationship between working-class wage stagnation in the West and the factories of China is to suggest another way in which Lukács’s categories must be rethought, for obviously enough he concerned himself with Europe and, in doing so, tended to think in terms of nations rather than world systems. Our notion of what counts as proletarian must be expanded, becoming something like Kavoulakos’s “under construction collective subject that remains internally heterogeneous” (165).<sup>26</sup> If Lukács lacked “an analysis of the complex ‘intersubjective process’ which constitutes the relationship of a particular social group to reality” there is nothing, Kavoulakos concludes, that prevents us from making up for the deficit ourselves (165). We can certainly do so, as long we keep the ethical goal of socialism in view at all times, subjecting our necessarily reified historical conclusions to the stern discipline of that “insuperable barrier to a rationalist theory of knowledge,” history itself.<sup>27</sup>

### Notes

1. Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectic*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971 [1923]).
2. Lukács, *History* xi, 83.
3. *History* 1.
4. *History* 197.
5. That Lukács himself did not always perform this intellectual activity — relying, most notoriously, in his critique of modernism on a reified notion of the historical novel — does not change the fact that this lesson can be drawn from his work.
6. Georg Lukács, *Tactics and Ethics: Political Writings, 1919-1929*, trans. Michael McColgan (New York: Harper and Row, 1972) 5.
7. Lukács, *Tactics* 5.
8. *Tactics* 6.
9. *Tactics* 5.
10. *Tactics* 7.
11. *Tactics* 8.
12. *Tactics* 9.
13. *ibid.*
14. *Tactics* 11.
15. *Tactics* 10.
16. *Tactics* 6.
17. *Tactics* 8.
18. Lukács offers here something like Marx's famous remarks from *The Eighteenth Brumaire*: "Proletarian revolutions, however, such as those of the nineteenth century, constantly engage in self-criticism, and in repeated interruption of their own course." Karl Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," trans. Ben Fowkes, *Marx's Political Writings Volume 2: Surveys from Exile*, ed. David Fernbach (New York: Verso, 2010) 143-249.
19. Timothy Bewes and Timothy Hall, eds. *Georg Lukács: The Fundamental Dissonance of Existence: Aesthetics, Politics, Literature* (London: Continuum, 2011).
20. Bewes and Hall, *Dissonance* 189.
21. *Dissonance* 61.
22. It is worth noting, however, that this extension into the world is not a feature of every essay in Bewes's and Hall's volume. Nor does its absence trouble each of the essays in Thompson's collection. While generally strong, each volume has the typical ups and downs of edited collections.
23. "As far as Lukács is concerned, the conception of totality outlined in *History and Class Consciousness* must be read, not as some positive vision of the end of history in the sense of Schelling's Absolute, but as something quite different, namely a methodological standard." Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1981) 52.
24. A strong defense of universal history that dismantles the reifications of difference in the work of the Subaltern Studies group can be found in Vivek Chibber, *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2013).

25. *History* 150.
26. Neil Larsen's excellent "Lukács sans Proletariat, or, Can *History and Class Consciousness* Be Historicized?" takes up a similar concern. See Bewes and Hall 81-100.
27. *History* 144.





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