

Reading with the Grain: A New World in Literary Criticism

Can literary criticism survive the decline of the symptom? This essay will consider the question of what it might be to read literature today, a question that, I will argue, concerns the spatial relation between the act of reading and its object. This spatiality is presupposed in most current practices of critical interpretation, including those that model themselves on the structure of the symptom, as well as others that situate themselves outside or in opposition to that model.¹

This question of spatialized relations includes, of course, temporal ones. All thinking about the state of, and prospects for, critical method “today” situates itself *in relation to* a tradition, problem, or impasse from which the posing of the question, and any proposed solution, are chronologically (that is, spatially) distinct. It is almost impossible to escape such implication. Thus, the historical moment in which this investigation is undertaken is the aftermath of a period in Anglo-American literary studies, lasting half a century or so, during which the phrase “against the grain,” and the method supposedly denoted by it, slowly, and in violation of its most essential principle, took on the force of a critical axiom.

In this narrative, “counterintuitive” methods of reading take the place of “intuitive” methods, with the result that the relation between intuition and counterintuition is inverted; the unnatural reading becomes what Georg Lukács called a “second nature” (*Theory* 62).

The focus of this discussion, however, will not be on the evolution of a new critical orientation to succeed the previous one, nor on prescribing a return to older methods, nor on denouncing the wrong turns and failed interpretations that have led to this conjuncture. The obligation it responds to is both more and less historical. With the passing of a world in which prevailing realities were identifiable, competing strategies for changing those realities capable of dialogue, and the world to come situated unambiguously in the future, what seems more obsolete than anything is the idea of a linear evolution in critical method, of one approach being naturally, or dialectically, succeeded by another. My intention, rather, is to address the question of critical method without presupposing either a spatial relation between criticism and its object, or a topographical conception of the literary text as such, or a temporal break between the critical event and the work, according to which the first task toward a critical reading of the work would be a diligent historical contextualization. The challenge of the present is to rethink the scene of the critical encounter in the full acknowledgment that the notion of critical distance, and the innocence it implies, can no longer be regarded as given—or at least that the current problems faced in literary method arise with the persistence of this notion, rather than its dissolution; to do so, moreover, without lapsing into a melancholic register of critical self-enclosure, or reconceiving the ambitions of the critical undertaking by reference to its limitations.

The issues at stake in the relation between criticism and its object are thrown into relief most illuminatingly, for the purposes of this analysis, in Lukács’s great work *The Theory of the Novel*. At the end of his essay, the prevailing mood of which has been defined by its underlying premise of a world “abandoned by God” (88), Lukács abruptly changes key. In the last paragraphs, after noting the absence of any foreseeable literary development beyond “the novel of disillusionment,” Lukács evokes a literature that will depict “a new world, remote from any struggle against what actually exists,” a world “drawn for the first time simply as a seen reality” (152). This new literary form, which for Lukács is foreshadowed in the works of Dostoevsky, will by implication redeem the novel from the state of “absolute sinfulness” to which the diagnosis in the preceding hundred

pages has consigned it. In these final moments, Lukács is gesturing toward a condition in which the work comes to exist in continuity with the world in which it is read. Although he doesn't say so explicitly, and although he will later condemn these sentences for their "primitive utopianism" (20), it is apparent that such a condition must be defined as much by the critical reception of works as by literary production. The fulfillment of Lukács's vision—of a world no longer divided between inside and outside, subject and object, reflection and sensation, feelings and ethics—could never be realized in a specific aesthetic form. Lukács's "new world" requires not a pioneering subjective creativity, but an approach to reading—a task, he says, of "historico-philosophical interpretation"—that would dissolve the distinction between "the merely existent" and the realm of critical engagement (153); dissolve, that is to say, the distinction between writer and critic, between, to put it even more provocatively, the activities of writing and reading themselves.

Could Lukács's vision of a "new world" that can speak its truth in a form that is self-evident, "adequate" to itself, offer a way forward for literary criticism at the present time, a way whose clearest delineation would be found in the accumulation of ambiguities in those final paragraphs of this early work? Such a proposition is in tension with the form of the novel, or rather, with the form of thinking of which the novel is exemplary. For it is the novel form itself, according to Lukács, that keeps such oppositions in place. Like philosophy, from which it is inseparable, the novel is for Lukács "a symptom of the rift between 'inside' and 'outside,' a sign of the essential difference between the self and the world, the incongruence of soul and deed" (29). However, one of the fascinating aspects of Lukács's text is that the object of his thesis in *The Theory of the Novel* seems increasingly to be not an object—an ontologically or historically bounded literary form—but a mode of thought. The novel for Lukács is not something to be subjected to criticism or theoretical reflection. It is less a form than a "problem," one born of "the refusal of the immanence of being to enter into empirical life" (71). One way of articulating the dissonance that Lukács finds peculiar to the novel is to say that not only is the novel read; it *reads*. The novel itself is a theorization, driven by its own lack of "completeness" (73). The novel thus signals the introduction of theory into literature long before, say, the irruptions of the 1960s and 1970s. The novel cannot escape theoretical being; its discursive fabric is pontification, which is to say, theory. As a result, the justification for the novel, if we think solely in terms of "content," is found in the domain of

the ethical. “What is given form here,” writes Lukács, “is not the totality of life but the artist’s relationship with that totality, his approving or condemnatory attitude towards it” (53).

This proposition is important for the critical turn that will be charted in the course of this essay. “Reading with the grain,” as I name the approach to be outlined here, is a reading that is tied to the novel form, that recognizes the novel as part of its own formation, and that resolves to read, henceforth, *alongside* the novel. The experience of reading a novel is one of reading an event of reading. Novels are entities that read—in which reader and read coincide. This is not to say that the object of such an approach is limited to novels. In the age of the novel, cinema, painting, theater, philosophy, poetry, music, all read; and when we read them, we do so alongside the novel.² Lukács’s theory of the novel enables us to understand all forms of thought that are practiced in the age of the novel, even those (which may include the novel) that regard the novel as a form to be resisted or overcome.

The most difficult implication of this idea is the need to outgrow our supposedly Benjaminian habits of reading against the grain—the phrase that functioned as a byword for theoretically informed criticism in the second half of the twentieth century. In its place would appear a reading that suspends judgment, that commits itself, rather, to the *most generous reading possible*. For all the suspicion that these words will arouse among readers schooled in the dominant critical traditions of the twentieth century, and pending a number of qualifications that will be made in the pages that follow, I argue that it has finally become possible, and necessary, to read “with the grain”; further, that historical conditions are such that it is by these means precisely that we may best remain faithful to Walter Benjamin’s injunction in “Theses on the Philosophy of History” to “brush history against the grain” (257).

The Problem of Symptomatic Reading

A number of thinkers and literary critics have recently begun putting into question the principles behind the supposedly normative practice of reading “symptomatically.” One prominent intervention explains the readability of the symptom in the following terms—by which it seeks to make symptomatic reading itself the focus of a critique:

When symptomatic readers focus on elements present in the text, they construe them as symbolic of something latent or concealed; for example, a queer symptomatic reading might interpret the closet, or ghosts, as surface signs of the deep truth of a homosexuality that cannot be overtly depicted. Symptomatic readings [. . .] often locate outright absences, gaps, and ellipses in texts, and then ask what those absences mean, what forces create them, and how they signify the questions that motivate the text, but that the text itself cannot articulate. (Best and Marcus 3)

Not much reflection is needed, however, to see that the issues facing critical method at the present time are not best conceived in such topographical or oppositional terms. Understood as a distinction between surface and depth, or between what is manifest in the text and what is unconscious, “symptomatic reading” as an object of critique runs the risk of reinscribing the topographical structure in the very act of separation from it. Once we conceive of symptomatic reading as a practice that has become outdated, redundant, attended by “discontents,” or simply uninteresting to us, we are ourselves engaging in that same outmoded practice: identifying an object of inquiry that conforms to a certain designation; diagnosing that object by reference to some historical-cultural failure, complacency, or oversight external to it; and prescribing in its place a practice of reading that conceives its object of study, on one hand, and its own critical intentions, on the other, in correspondingly different terms. In the pathologization of symptomatic reading as a problem, that is to say, and in any proposed solution or successor to it, certain ideals associated with symptomatic reading remain: the materiality of the text as distinct from that of the interpretive process; the event of reading as the approach of an intentioned subject to a (resistant or receptive) object; the coexistence of the text with historical circumstances—a context—that may illuminatingly be brought to bear on that text; and a quality of self-identity and ideological unity attributable to the text itself.

The paradox is indicative of a tension in the term itself. For Louis Althusser, the figure responsible for its most systematic elaboration, symptomatic reading is not a process of unearthing what is “latent,” nor is it a model of interpretation that could be “applied” by a critical subject. Symptomatic reading is for Althusser a “circular” concept—or rather it *becomes* so when, as a practice, it is undertaken in relation to one writer in particular, and one particular text of that writer. Symptomatic reading

is not a generalizable method, but an approach with specific applicability to the work of Karl Marx, a writer who was himself engaged in a reading of political economy in terms of “presences and absences, sights and oversights” (Althusser, “From *Capital*” 20), but whose work created the conditions for reading the text by reference only to itself—as Althusser wrote, a process of comparing “its non-vision with its vision” (22). For Althusser, that process is seen primarily in terms of a problem: the paradox of reading a writer who is himself a “prodigious” and “scrupulous” reader. In the opening section of *Reading Capital*, Althusser describes symptomatic reading as “the application of that which is the very object of our investigation, Marxist philosophy” (56). Symptomatic reading is only possible, in other words, because of the results of its own operation: Marxist philosophy. For Althusser, the task is not merely to “make manifest what is latent,” but rather to retroactively transform “something which [. . .] already exists” into the form of “an object adapted to an end,” the end in question being the thing that makes such a reading possible in the first place. The reading of theoretical texts—the only ones, he says, “whose analysis is at issue here” (29)—is undertaken, then, from a perspective that attempts to think, simultaneously, the before and after of its own reading.

This, I argue, is a process of deep historicization. It begins by historicizing its own temporal positionality with respect to its object of study and refuses to abstract from that positionality a process of “historicizing” the text—or the object of study—*as such*. If every reading is, as Althusser insists, “guilty,” this is due as much to the inevitability of its historical belatedness as to that of its ideological situatedness.

Arguably, the text that is most responsible for the dissemination of the notion of symptomatic reading across literary studies is Fredric Jameson’s essay “On Interpretation,” which opens *The Political Unconscious*.⁵ Rereading Jameson now, however, I find his elaboration of Althusser’s project not especially attentive to the specificity of Althusser’s object of symptomatic reading (Marx’s *Capital*); nor, for all his famous insistence upon “historicization,” does Jameson always acknowledge Althusser’s insistence upon the historicity of the reading event itself.⁴ Althusser characterizes Marx’s encounter with Adam Smith and David Ricardo as a reading that “divulges the undivulged event in the text that it reads, and in the same moment relates it to a *different text*, present as a necessary absence in the first” (29); this second text Althusser labels, in perhaps the least circumspect moment in the book, “the unconscious” (16).⁵ It is this moment, with its implications of a topography of latent and

manifest content, that appears to inform Jameson's notion of the "political unconscious."

Jameson's method of reading literary and theoretical texts seems to follow a symptomatic topography rather than the symptomatic "circularity" of Althusser's reading of Marx. Most notably, when reading European theorists whose work emerges from a rejection of the hermeneutic tradition—and even as he aligns his approach to theirs—Jameson finds himself, as if by compulsion, digging out meaning-filled caves behind their symptomatic utterances. Presenting Gilles Deleuze's notion of the "schizophrenic" text alongside Derridean deconstruction, and conceiving them as part of a unitary project to replace totality with "difference, flux, dissemination, and heterogeneity," he writes: "If such perceptions are to be celebrated in their intensity, they must be accompanied by some initial appearance of continuity, some ideology of unification already in place, which it is their mission to rebuke and to shatter. The value of the molecular in Deleuze, for instance, depends structurally on the preexisting molar or unifying impulse against which its truth is read" (53). While acknowledging the power of Deleuze and Guattari's "rejection" of interpretation in *Anti-Oedipus*, and casually assimilating their interest in "immanent" rather than "transcendent" (or hermeneutic) reading criteria to his own project, Jameson writes: "[T]he ideal of an immanent analysis of the text [. . .] amounts less to a wholesale nullification of all interpretive activity than to a demand for the construction of some new and more adequate, immanent or antitranscendent hermeneutic model" (23) (a model that his own work, he says, will begin to outline). These statements, however, derive not from Althusser's theory of symptomatic reading, as elaborated in relation to the privileged text of Marx's *Capital*, but from the "classical" tradition of critical diagnostic writing—the very tradition with which *Capital* marks the break ("Marx's Immense" 210–11). Althusser's notion of symptomatic reading is not a critical, topographical reading, but a generous one—the most generous reading possible. It is an approach that is, according to Althusser, opened up by Marx, even though, throughout *Capital*, Marx himself struggles to sustain it and frequently lapses back into the use of what Althusser calls "reference concepts"—terms that draw on and reiterate a topography of essence and appearance, knowledge of reality and reality itself, inside and outside, cause and symptom, and so on. These slips of Marx's are comprehensible, for Althusser, simply because it is so difficult to think "the remarkable reality of the effectivity of a structure on its elements" otherwise (211).

The names Althusser and Jameson, then, stand in the current critical conversation for two different versions of symptomatic reading predicated upon two different relations to the symptom. This is partly a matter of shortcuts. As I hope is apparent from what I've already said, to draw such stark, preferential distinctions is inherently to betray one form of symptomatic reading—Althusser's generous "circularity"—with the other. The first requires that we approach literary texts not as objects but as readings; this is the exhilarating lesson offered by Althusser in *Reading Capital*. The opposite tendency is to turn a reading (a text) into an object.⁶ However, the very distinction between Althusser and Jameson risks succumbing to this fallacy; indeed, the almost insuperable challenge faced by every post-Althusserian writer on the symptom is to articulate the former position without, in so doing, inhabiting the latter.

Subtraction and Recollection

Alain Badiou's philosophical project is one of the more provocative recent attempts to reexamine the structure of the symptom and to rethink the relation between a suspicious and a generous reading. For Badiou "our century"—the twentieth—may be characterized as a debate between two critical orientations, both of which exist as expressions of its defining "subjective trait": the "passion for the real" (*Century* 58). The first is devoted to "purification through destruction"—that is to say, to the negation of every instance of mere "semblance" in the quest for the real. According to Badiou, the dominant strains of both Marxism and psychoanalysis, the intellectual traditions most characteristic of twentieth-century thought, participate in such a "symptomal set-up," whereby representation "is a symptom (to be read or deciphered) of a real that it *subjectively localizes in the guise of misrecognition*" (49, my emphasis). This formulation succinctly evacuates the topographical hypothesis. The problem with the topographical structure, says Badiou, is that "the real, conceived in its contingent absoluteness, is never real enough not to be suspected of semblance. The passion for the real is also, of necessity, suspicion" (52); and suspicion, following the logic reconstructed by Hegel in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, can only end in the generalized purging exemplified in Stalinist (or the French revolutionary) Terror. "Ultimately, death is the sole possible name of pure freedom, and 'dying well' the only thing that escapes suspicion" (54).

The second orientation, which Badiou names “subtraction,” proceeds on an entirely different basis, rejecting at the outset the proposition of a “beyond” that is hidden or interrupted by formal representation. The point of subtraction is not to undertake the destruction of reality as an “exhibition” of the real, but to “subtract [reality] from its apparent unity so as to detect within it the minuscule difference, the vanishing term that constitutes it” (65). Another way of saying this, to borrow from a recent work by Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit (who themselves borrow from a film by Jean-Luc Godard), is that subtraction as a critical procedure locates the real not *beyond* formal representation but on “this side of” it (6). Subtraction asserts the disunity in every assertion of substance and unity; its first principle is the rejection of “every density, every claim to substantiality, and every assertion of reality” (Badiou, *Century* 64). This suggests the opposite of critical “suspicion” or an exercise of critical demystification, something closer to a complicity with the work, a thinking *before* it or *alongside* it—which is to say, a thinking of the work in the absence of any ontological closure to it. “Instead of treating the real as identity,” writes Badiou, “it is treated right away as a gap. The question of the real/semblance relation will not be resolved by a purification that would isolate the real, but by understanding that the gap is itself real” (56). The path of subtraction forsakes every formal representation of the truth for the truth-event that is produced in the moment of its own encounter with it.

For Badiou, one of the inaugural moments of the subtractive orientation is Kazimir Malevich’s 1918 *Suprematist Composition: White on White*, in which a white square appears at an angle within the white square of the canvas. Malevich’s painting is “the epitome of purification,” says Badiou, in which “the abstract difference of ground and form, and above all, the null difference between white and white, the difference of the Same” are exhibited precisely as the “minimal difference” (56). *White on White* should not be taken as a symbol of the destruction of painting, then, but as “the staging of a minimal, albeit absolute, difference”—the difference *of the same*; that is to say, the possibility that the difference even between something so apparently unitary as the color white and any other color may, in its actuality, be no greater than the differences internal to it. The path opened up is one of “subtracting” the event of thought from the false unity that is identity itself.

Despite the irrefutable presence in the twentieth century of artistic works that explore this instability of the event, it is difficult to subscribe wholly to Badiou’s claim about the centrality of this debate between

destruction and subtraction. Huge differences separate the thought of the various twentieth-century critics and thinkers who are implicitly lined up alongside each other: say, Lukács, Derrida, and Habermas (on one side), and Brecht, Althusser, and Deleuze (on the other). Nevertheless, forty years earlier, Paul Ricoeur, a philosopher about whom Badiou has written very little and nothing that is not explicitly critical and distancing,⁷ offered an analysis that seems to have anticipated Badiou's in everything but the terms.

Ricoeur's distinction between a "hermeneutic of suspicion" and a "hermeneutic of recollection" is most clearly articulated in his early work *Freud and Philosophy*. As with Badiou's concepts of destruction and subtraction, Ricoeur's distinction is a modern one; it appears historically with the major works of the figures whom Ricoeur calls the "masters of suspicion": Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche (32). What such thinkers have in common, for all their differences, is that each takes up "the problem of the Cartesian doubt" and carries it "to the very heart of the Cartesian stronghold" (33). Each, that is to say, insists upon the illusory quality of consciousness; each counters that illusion with a "science" (the critique of ideology for Marx, the theory of the unconscious drives for Freud, the proposition of the will to power for Nietzsche) that will be "irreducible to the immediate *consciousness* of meaning" (34)—that accounts for the content of consciousness by reference to a reality that consciousness cannot or will not accommodate. Ricoeur's "hermeneutic of recollection" begins from a different premise: the possibility of a relation of "neutrality" toward the object, the wish "to describe and not to reduce" (28). The principal way in which one "reduces," says Ricoeur, is by "explanation"—that is, by referring the object to a discursive order that may be etiological (explaining through causes), genetic (explaining through origin), or instrumental (explaining through function, including the function of ideology). In each case, the object itself is subordinated to habits of perception and practices of conceptualization that are by definition heterogeneous to it. Such a structure is one of suspicion, in which consciousness and its outside exist in a kind of epistemological standoff. It is rejected in Ricoeur's phenomenology on the grounds that not only perception, but the very values of "veracity" or "illusion" that we attribute to it—the experiences of "faith" or "suspicion"—themselves reside in consciousness and are inextricable from it.

Against the "school of suspicion," Ricoeur posits something like Badiou's strategy of subtraction: a suspension of any notion of a "beyond" to the impressions of consciousness. Any critical activity takes place on

“this side of” the distinction between consciousness and its outside. For all their differences—Badiou’s political militancy, Ricoeur’s reflective religiosity; Badiou’s rhetorical commitment to the “real,” Ricoeur’s emphasis on consciousness as the site where “meaning and consciousness of meaning coincide” (33)—Badiou and Ricoeur share a commitment to thought as an event that is betrayed, or at least threatened, by the forms in which it is expressed, hypostasized, made transportable. For both Badiou and Ricoeur, one implication is unignorable: we see (or read) most clearly, most truthfully, when we acknowledge that the only moment that can be said to contain the truth of the object, or the text, is the moment of our encounter with it. For all the undoubted emphasis that literary criticism has given to historicization since the publication of Jameson’s *Political Unconscious*, the lesson of Ricoeur’s and Badiou’s work is that the moment in time on which we must focus the work of historicizing, in the first instance, is *that in which we ourselves are writing and reading*. “The time of restoration is not a different time from that of criticism,” says Ricoeur in *The Symbolism of Evil*. “[W]e are in every way children of criticism, and we seek to go beyond criticism by means of criticism, by a criticism that is no longer reductive but restorative” (350).

The film theorist and critic André Bazin described the capacity of the photographic lens to strip the object of “all those ways of seeing it, those piled-up preconceptions, that spiritual dust and grime with which my eyes have covered it” (15). For Ricoeur, the possibility exists, similarly, of “dis-implicating” (that is, subtracting) the object “from the various intentions of behavior, discourse, and emotion” (*Freud* 29). But for Ricoeur, there is no need of a photographic apparatus; such, rather, is the task of a “hermeneutic of recollection” in which what is “restored” or “recollected” is not something in the object that preexists the accumulation of “spiritual” debris, but a mode of engagement with it. Ricoeur’s intention is to arrive at a “second naïveté” (*Freud* 28; *Symbolism* 351), a truth of the object born of the encounter with it. This truth emerges, then, alongside an approach to the object that Ricoeur describes as the “expectation of being spoken to” (*Freud* 29). The recollected “meaning” of the text is inseparable from this principle. “The theme of the phenomenology of religion,” writes Ricoeur, “is the *something* intended in ritual actions, in mythical speech, in belief or mystical feeling” (29), and that something is not translatable into terms other than those of the encounter itself.

The difference between “suspicion” and “recollection” is not simply a difference between two kinds of interpretation but between

two *interpretations* of interpretation. The first regards interpretation as demystification, a “reduction of the illusions and lies of consciousness” that attempts thereby to “clear the horizon for a more authentic word, for a new reign of Truth” (32, 33). The second approaches the text in the absolute confidence of being spoken to, in the certitude that language cannot fail it. Ricoeur insists on this principle of “the fullness of language,” by which he means that language retains its “opacity” even at its most apparently transparent. Language is not exhaustible, even by the most dogged exercise in decodification. Thus, to speak of the inadequacy (or adequacy) of language is for Ricoeur a category error. Language is not spoken *by* men, but *to* them; this is so even when, in the ordinary sense, it is spoken by them. For Ricoeur, we are always interpreting; every use of language, every noun and adjective, is already an interpretation—which means that, in another sense, we are never interpreting. Interpretation is an activity without hope of an encounter with reality other than the reality of its encounter with the object.

The critical approach I am arguing for in this essay intersects with both Badiou’s notion of “subtraction” and Ricoeur’s “hermeneutic of recollection.” I will not be especially concerned to detail differences with—or between—these thinkers. One of the propositions of “reading with the grain” is that “disagreement” is a separation predicated upon egoism: upon the idea that a thought is fully articulated in its expression and communication. “Disagreement” reproduces the image of language as referential, a relation of “arbitrary correspondence” (Saussure) between language and its outside. In reality, thoughts that have taken place elsewhere are a part of us and of our thoughts, whether we “agree” with them or not. Furthermore, to ascribe a unity and an identity to any particular thought, as “disagreement” does by definition, is to limit thought to its “actuality,” to its linguistic or conceptual being or the intentions that might have been entertained by the individual to whom we attribute it. Thought that stays within the boundaries laid out by linguistic difference is mere tautology.

This is not to say that disagreements are necessarily unfounded or lack substance, only that the possibility always exists, if only theoretical or unrealizable, of dissolving disagreements into rhetorical differences—or alternatively, of discovering quite different intentionalities behind identical rhetorical and political forms, or even within a single utterance.⁸ This is another implication of Badiou’s strategy of subtraction, predicated upon the event of a thought that “cannot be discerned or separated as a thought” (*Handbook* 19).

In his own philosophical readings and positionings, Badiou frequently betrays this implication. Thus, in putting forward Malevich's *White on White* as an illustration of the truth of "minimal difference," Badiou's reading falls short of an encounter with the event. "Minimal difference," as it emerges in that reading, is a truth that has been articulated in advance, with great lucidity, precisely as a thinkable thought (*Handbook* 19). The painting is read not as a work that is unequal with or different from itself, but as a staging of the *doctrine* of "minimal difference." And the same might be said of Badiou's readings elsewhere, which privilege works—say, by Stéphane Mallarmé or Samuel Beckett—that are particularly receptive to his own understanding of the literary "event," works that, by implication, share that understanding.⁹ When he actually engages works of art or literature, then, Badiou frequently reestablishes an ethos of "reference"—of the text's content, its unity, and its ethical applicability—at precisely the moment that his readings most boldly *articulate* a rejection of reference.¹⁰

How to avoid making what Ricoeur calls a "reduction" of the work? How to read critically without offering an "explanation" of it? For all Badiou's efforts in theorization, the task of reading subtractively remains to be formulated as a practice. Perhaps such a formulation must, in order not to betray itself at the moment of its application or realization, be deferred perpetually. It is in the light of these questions, however, that I will outline an argument for taking as the object of our reading not the text as such, but ourselves reading, and for conceiving the "historicity" of the text not in terms of some historical moment proper to it, but primarily as the moment of the reading itself.

The Image of Thought

All these different models of reading—the latent/manifest topographical model, the circular model, Badiou's subtractive reading, Ricoeur's notion of recollection, the aspiration to generosity, or to reading alongside the text—are examples of what, in *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze calls "an image of thought." What we call "thought," says Deleuze, is almost always preceded by certain "subjective or implicit presuppositions" about the nature of thought: for example, that there is a "self" who "thinks"; that such activity in thinking is the effect of a "natural" faculty; that such a faculty labors "under the double aspect of a good will on the part of the thinker and an upright nature on the part of thought" (129, 131). Deleuze's implication is that we are never really thinking when

such an image or a concept of thought determines or is presupposed in our thought. The point of departure for his elaboration is a question he attributes to Socrates' interlocutor Glaucon in book 7 of Plato's *Republic*: "Is it when we do not recognize, when we have difficulty recognizing, that we truly think?" (158). For Deleuze, "recognition" is inimical to thinking; all thought is "involuntary," arising not from the "good will" and noble aspirations of the thinker, but from "an original violence inflicted upon thought"—an "encounter," which forces us to think by its unrecognizability, by its sensory immediacy, by the powerlessness of recollection, imagination, or conceptualization in the face of it.

Is it possible to think outside an "image of thought"? For Althusser, it seems, the answer is no. As he famously declares, there are no innocent readings: "[E]very reading merely reflects in its lessons and rules the real culprit: the conception of knowledge [i.e., the image of thought] underlying the object of knowledge which makes knowledge what it is" ("From *Capital*" 36–37). However, this notion of "guilty reading" is one place where Althusser himself should be opened up to a "symptomatic" treatment. Such a reading would involve what I have already characterized as a process of "deep" historicization (that, too, of course, is an image of thought). It would begin by reading Althusser's category of guilty reading not by reference to some distinction between guilt and innocence external to the text, but in terms of the inherent circularity of the notion—that is to say, by referring it to itself. Althusser, we must remember, is a reader, no less so than Marx; and it is precisely as a reader that one is guilty—inevitably so. Reading cannot not be guilty, and that includes the reading in which Althusser develops the concept of "guilty reading." The concept of guilty reading—the guilt of guilty reading—is itself implicated, therefore, in the guilty reading of which it is a product. To put it another way: if no thought is possible outside an image of thought, then that circumstance—the inevitability of an image of thought—is also an image of thought. Althusser's procedure of guilty reading is identical, perhaps, to the procedure by which one frees oneself from guilty reading.

In *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze writes about his own use of schizophrenia as a figure for a nondogmatic, noninterpretive reading—what he will later call "schizoanalysis" (Deleuze and Guattari 296). Such an image should not, he writes, be opposed to a "dogmatic" reading—to the topographical plasticity of the symptom or the notion of the text as a complex of "reference concepts"—but should rather be regarded as "a possibility for thought—one, moreover, which can only be revealed as such

through the abolition of that image” (148). The image of schizophrenia, say, demands its own abolition as such if it is to avoid simply replicating the dogmatic temperament that takes error as the sole possible “misadventure of thought.” This proposition also applies to the idea of symptomatic reading, which may only be dispensed with in a process that, in so doing, retains it. While we may share a desire to move beyond a practice of symptomatic reading predicated upon an order of truth behind or within the text—a movement that might take such a form, for example, as the pursuit of a pure thought without image—that formulation of a “beyond” to symptomatic reading merely replaces one image with another.

For Deleuze, it is the unique potential of art—of literature, cinema, music, and painting—to enable us to think outside an “image of thought”; yet that possibility naturally implies a certain practice of reading, a practice that will refuse the transfiguration of the work into something other than the work, or any foreclosure upon the work’s meaning. What Deleuze says about art and literature must also be valid, therefore, for critical or even philosophical writing; were this not the case, the separation of artistic and critical activity would function, in effect, to excavate yet another topography (or speleography) of the symptom. “The conditions of a true critique and a true creation are the same,” writes Deleuze: “the destruction of an image of thought which presupposes itself and the genesis of the act of thinking in thought itself” (139).

The concept of symptomatic reading, therefore (and this is to restate the difference between Althusser and Jameson mentioned earlier), is divided between an image of thought that ceaselessly abolishes itself as a principle of its existence and one that perpetually reinserts itself, or a surrogate, in place of every promise of a thought without image. To think outside an image of thought, to think truly, is possible only by thinking the image of thought itself.

“Against the Grain”: A Corrective Reading

One version of symptomatic reading that took hold during the twentieth century, and that long ago evolved into an image of thought with a huge quotient of recognizability, is the notion of reading “against the grain.” Less a critical practice than a watchword, reading against the grain emerged out of yet another reading, that of Benjamin’s Thesis 7 on the philosophy of history, where, on the basis of his own reading of the theory of “historical materialism,” Benjamin announces the task of the critic as to “brush history

against the grain” (“Theses” 257). The “cultural treasures” that have survived history to confront the critic in the present are by definition stained, in Benjamin’s words, by “the anonymous toil of their contemporaries” (256). Reading against the grain, by implication, involves reading the text in the name of the “vanquished,” those whose fate is visible only negatively, in the form of the text’s absences, gaps, and repressions.

However, in an expository reading of Benjamin’s seventh thesis in *Minima Moralia*, Theodor Adorno points out the dangers of allowing dialectical thought to congeal into such an image. When dialectical thought becomes a critical “method,” absolved from guilt in what it is reading and presupposing an economy of presences and absences at play in the text, the defeated are turned into a constituency, a repressed historical entity, which every reading is obliged to bring into visibility. On the contrary, what defines the defeated, says Adorno, is that they are unidentifiable, that they have precisely not found a means of expression in an image of thought. “It is in the nature of the defeated,” he writes, “to appear, in their impotence, irrelevant, eccentric, derisory” (151). The “defeated,” then, are an emblem—an image, even—for thought without an image. If they are to be rendered their due, it will only be in remaining faithful to the possibility of a thought without image. Anything less, as Adorno writes, is to grant to “mere existence” power over the universal; it is to subordinate right thinking—thinking *tout court*—to the failure to think. For Adorno, accordingly, works of literature are shot through with “the waste products and blind spots that have escaped the dialectic”—elements that no creative intention can account for. It is this “opaque, unassimilated material,” rather than simply the “fatally rectilinear succession of victory and defeat,” that knowledge henceforth must address. Far from being an argument for reading the text in opposition to the “great intentions” that have informed its production, the real injunction of Benjamin’s seventh thesis on the philosophy of history, for Adorno, is “to bring the intentionless within the realm of concepts,” to bring to fruition even that which has *not* been “foreclosed” by intentions (152).

In an essay from 1931, Benjamin uses similar terms to describe a quality specific to photography, a quality that, he says, gives photography “something that goes beyond testimony to the photographer’s art” and that he calls the “optical unconscious” (“Little History” 510–12). “No matter how artful the photographer,” he says, “no matter how carefully posed his subject, the beholder [of the photograph] feels an irresistible urge to search for the tiny spark of contingency, of the here and now, with which reality

has (so to speak) seared the subject, to find the inconspicuous spot where in the immediacy of that long forgotten moment the future nests so eloquently that we, looking back, may rediscover it” (510). This element—the optical unconscious—cannot be circumscribed by artistic intention; in fact, it is defined as that which cannot be circumscribed by artistic intention. Like Bazin, writing fifteen years later, Benjamin locates this “magical” quality of photography in the “precision” of its technical apparatus: “[I]t is another nature which speaks to the camera rather than to the eye: ‘other’ above all in the sense that a space informed by human consciousness gives way to a space informed by the unconscious.”

If there is a “political unconscious” in works of literature, it exists not, as Jameson suggests, in a hermeneutic structure, denoting an economy of presence and absence, a topographical interplay between a text’s manifest thought content and its “underside or *impensé* or *non-dit*” (49). “Political unconscious” should be taken, rather, in a Benjaminian sense: as a proliferation of intentionlessnesses, visible and on the surface. This Benjaminian inflection of Jameson’s notion is made possible, even necessary, by the existence of photography, and even more so by cinema.

Literature, of course, is not usually thought of as a mechanical apparatus; indeed, the common view would consider the proportion of intention over intentionlessness to be higher in literature than in almost any other art form. And yet, I argue here, Benjamin’s optical unconscious is almost seamlessly transferable from these visual and mechanical media to literature, not through any essential quality of language, but due to the innovations that photography has made possible in thought. The absence of any sentimental attachment to mechanicity in Adorno—an attachment that, by implication, preserves the “nonmechanical” arts as loci of humanist “expression”—opens up his thinking to this possibility. “Language,” writes Adorno in another section in *Minima Moralia*, “is by its own objective substance social expression, even where it has abruptly severed itself from society as individual” (219).¹¹ Whatever one thinks of this proposition, it parallels Bazin’s main thesis about photography in “The Ontology of the Photographic Image”: “No matter how lacking in documentary value the image may be,” writes Bazin, “it shares, by virtue of the very process of its becoming, the being of the model of which it is the reproduction; it *is* the model” (14). No matter how idiosyncratic, how poetically inflected or stylized, for Adorno language is as “seared” (to use Benjamin’s term) by reality as the photographic image. In this, Adorno is close to Ricoeur’s insistence upon the “fullness” of language. And among the casualties of

this idea is the notion, inherited from Saussure, of language as a signifying system whose connection to reality is purely adventitious. For Saussure, the “formal” quality of language implies its removal from “substance” (113, 122); for Adorno and for Ricoeur, language is not only substantial but opaque, unfathomable.

Language functions as a mechanical apparatus, just as much as the camera or the piece of recording equipment. “Words and phrases spoil by use do not reach the secluded workshop intact,” writes Adorno. “History does not merely touch on language, but takes place in it” (*Minima* 219). It is precisely this “textual unconscious” of writing that explains a further, uncomfortable implication of Benjamin’s seventh thesis. If every document of civilization is also a document of barbarism, as Benjamin claims, the conclusion is inescapable that every document of barbarism is also a document of civilization.¹² In principle, any text at all, from the most politically vapid or obnoxious to those infused by religious sanctimony or technocratic mediocrity, has a revolutionary potentiality that may be read precisely in those moments of “intentionlessness,” moments where, in Benjamin’s words, “the future nests so eloquently that we, looking back, may rediscover it.”

Benjamin’s notion of “brushing history against the grain,” then, is not a method of reading history or literature *from the point of view* of the defeated. Reading against the grain is, in Deleuze’s words, “a possibility for thought,” but it is revealed as such only through its abolition as an image. “Against the grain,” just as much as “symptomatic reading” for Althusser, is a circular concept. Reading against the grain must read *against itself* in the first instance: against the tendency to oppose a reading “against the grain” to, for example, a reading “with the grain.” Against the grain involves, simultaneously and to the same degree, reading with the grain: a reading that suspends judgment; that historicizes the text and the moment of reading the text simultaneously; that refuses to frame the text as existing independently of our reading of it; that engages with the radical instability, potentiality, and appropriability of the text, rather than its identity.

***Morality and Perspective:
Lessons of Photography and Cinema***

It is striking how frequently writing concerned with the activities of reading and interpretation, especially in the first half of the twentieth century, makes use of a discourse of morality: metaphors of guilt

and innocence, sin and redemption, repentance and atonement, judgment and the suspension of judgment. Despite the persistent idea that what distinguishes literature from other art forms is the ineradicability of what Althusser calls “reference concepts” from language (“Marx’s Immense” 211), this discourse of morality is not restricted to discussions of literature. For Bazin, writing about visual art, the innovation of perspective in Western painting opens up a tension between realist imitation and spiritual expression; perspective thereby introduces a moral dimension—that is to say, a moral failing, a Fall—in art of the Renaissance period. The arrival of photography, for Bazin, renders that moral dimension obsolete. Perspective, he writes in “The Ontology of the Photographic Image,” “was the original sin of Western painting. It was redeemed from sin by Niépce and Lumière” (12). Photography, according to Bazin’s thesis, closes the gap between the demands of realism and those of spiritual expression by its mechanical quality: “Only a photographic lens can give us the kind of image of the object that is capable of satisfying the deep need man has to substitute for it something more than a mere approximation” (14). For Bazin the photographic image apparently returns us to something like the epic world that, for Lukács, was consigned to oblivion by the appearance of the novel: the age, long gone, when “the fire that burns in the soul is of the same essential nature as the stars” (Lukács, *Theory* 29). Could some conception of the “shared ontology” between model and world have the potential to redeem the “absolute sinfulness” of the novel form? Could it resolve the situation of “guilty reading” to which Althusser condemns the modern reader? Is there, in other words, something like an optical unconscious in literary works, too, that would operate completely away from the categories of reference, realism, ethics, ideology, intention, signification?

The Theory of the Novel would seem to answer this question negatively. In the world of the novel, writes Lukács, an “unbridgeable chasm” separates for the first time “cognition and action,” “soul and created structure,” “self and world,” these terms serving to underpin the decisive distinction between “essence” and “substance” (34). “In the created reality of the novel,” he writes further, “all that becomes visible is the distance separating the systematization from concrete life: a systematization which emphasizes the conventionality of the objective world and the interiority of the subjective one” (70). Perhaps the strongest statement of the ethical implications of this lack of a shared ontology in the novel comes in a parenthetical insertion—the bracketing of which belies its enormous significance for Lukács’s ideas about the ethics of the novel: “The ‘should

be' kills life, and every concept expresses a 'should-be' of its object; that is why thought can never arrive at a real definition of life" (48).

What Lukács is talking about here, with the term *concept*, is close to what Deleuze means by the image of thought. The concept, far from enabling thought, forecloses it, fixes it in an image. "Every concept expresses a 'should-be' of its object"—meaning not simply that conceptual language abstracts from existence, but that the novel form has the effect of creating and reiterating the modern conceptual—that is to say, ethical—universe. As the novel takes hold of human intellect, thought becomes dominated by the "image of thought," an entity from which it can never free itself; indeed, the very desire to do so rivets thought ever more tightly to the image. When, in Joseph Conrad's story *The Return*, the bourgeois Alvan Hervey comes home to find a note from his wife saying she is leaving him, the shock is such as to force him to think, for the first time in his life; the experience is both intellectually disorienting and physically exhilarating. "Something unknown, withering and poisonous, had entered his life, passed near him, touched him, and he was deteriorating. He was appalled. What was it? She was gone. Why? His head was ready to burst with the endeavour to understand her act and his subtle horror of it. Everything was changed. [. . .] He stared, shaking in every limb, while he felt the destructive breath, the mysterious breath, the breath of passion, stir the profound peace of the house" (15–16). And yet, even as Alvan stands alone, "naked and afraid, like the first man on the first day of evil" (19), trying to comprehend an event that outwits habits of thought established over decades, Conrad's effort to render palpable the crisis of his protagonist expresses the dominance, the ineluctability of the image of thought. Conrad is, in Lukácsian terms, the most novelistic of novelists; his works exhibit clearly the unresolvable tension between thought and recognition—the image of thought—that for Lukács signaled "a world abandoned by God" (92). The great discovery of Conrad's writing, observes Edward Said, "was that the chasm between words saying and words meaning was widened, not lessened, by a talent for words written." Conrad's intention, he continues, "is to make us see, or otherwise transcend the absence of everything but words, so that we may pass into a realm of vision beyond the words": a realm of thinking, then, unencumbered by the image of thought (90, 95). That tension—inaugurated by Conrad, perhaps, as much as by Lukács—is the very essence of the novel form, and Conrad its purest exemplar in the anglophone world.

The conditions that secure the novel to the ethical are indissoluble and constitutive; yet the wager of the present essay is that fiction must be constituted equally, to the same degree, by something that escapes ethical reflection, by that which succeeds in abolishing perspective, that which in the work is “seared” by reality, by moments of “intentionlessness,” what in photography Benjamin calls the “optical unconscious.” Further, this element is never anything identifiable within or extractable from the work. Rather, this quality is accessible only in a reading whose object of study is the moment of reading, quite as fully as the text itself: a “circular” reading—not simply of the text as encountered material object, but of the event of its production *inseparably from* the event of its reading, a reading with an eye to *the reading that the text itself makes possible*. The “political unconscious,” *pace* Jameson, is nothing other than the degree to which the text thinks. This is not a quality found only in certain texts; it is not a process that is attributable to any reading or writing subject beyond the confines of the text; and it does not yield up truths that may be administered, or understood, in any sphere outside it. The political unconscious, to invoke Lukács, is the epical quality of the text. Its promise is that even the novel, the form of the epoch of “absolute sinfulness,” might attain the happiness of an age in which “the fire that burns in the soul is of the same essential nature as the stars.”

Several years before he began work on *The Theory of the Novel*, Lukács produced a highly original essay on cinema, in which he wrote the following: “The world of the ‘cinema’ is [. . .] a world without background or perspective, without any difference in weight or quality, as only the present gives things fate and weight, light and lightness” (“Thoughts” 14). Unlike in the theater, Lukács’s main point of comparison, in the cinema “there are only movements and actions of people—but *no people*” (15). Cinema makes possible a certain circularity of thought, since there is no absence that is made present *by* cinema and no presence that takes the place of an absence. The effect of cinema is to cancel out the opposition between absence and presence—the very principle of representation—as well as the opposition between possibility and actuality. Cinema is not a form that may simply be “read”; or if it is, that is because it, too, “reads”: what we “read,” in cinema, is what cinema itself “reads.” Cinema demands to be regarded in the same way that it regards: with a complete absence of judgment. “The ‘cinema’ presents mere action but no motive or meaning,” writes Lukács. “Its characters have mere movement, but no souls,

and what occurs is simply an occurrence, but not fate” (15). Cinema transcends the concept—that entity that the novel expands into an order of ethical and symbolic significance. While the concept has its inadequacy embedded within it, implying a certain “‘should-be’ of its object,” in cinema “everything is true and real, is equally true and equally real” (15).

Lukács is talking about silent cinema. Central to the effects that he attributes to it—to “[render] everything light, bright and winged, frivolous and dancing”—is the “withdrawal of the word, and with it of memory, of truth and duty to oneself and to the idea of one’s selfhood”—that is to say, of those elements that make the stage (and, implicitly, the novel) a world of ethical complexity and aesthetic compromise.

My concern is not whether the qualities that Lukács attributes to early cinema truly existed there, nor whether the possibilities of the cinematic image were betrayed by the advent of sound or by the control that capitalism has since managed to secure over the medium. What is interesting in this early work by Lukács is, first, the principle of immanence that it presupposes between the work and the world; and second, the fact that this euphoric assessment of cinema appears to forge the terms with which, in *The Theory of the Novel*, Lukács would later counterpose the novel and the epic. Both texts see this principle of immanence as a binding together of “form” with “the historical moment” (152); thus the image of immanence as a specter of “possibility,” retreating perpetually into the future or lost in some vanished world of the past, is a further symptom of the “divided reality” of the “present,” and—for all that it seems suggested in *The Theory of the Novel*—is belied by the principle itself.

The question Lukács poses in both texts is how to escape from literature. In his “Little History of Photography,” Benjamin asks the same question of photography. By way of an answer, Benjamin cites the work of the early French photographer Eugène Atget, an artist who “looked for what was unremarked, forgotten, cast adrift”; his photographs of the façades of Parisian brothels, abandoned dining tables, and courtyards emptied of people “pump the aura out of reality like water from a sinking ship” (518). Benjamin defines aura in terms of perspective: as “a strange weave of space and time: the unique appearance or semblance of distance, no matter how close it may be.” Atget’s work, then, succeeds in removing everything “novelistic” from the image: everything that enables perspective, that encourages an ethical reflection. Indeed, what distinguishes Atget from his “imitators” (Benjamin mentions a fashion in “avant-garde periodicals” for photographs captioned “Westminster,” “Lille,” “Antwerp,”

or “Breslau” but that show only details: a piece of balustrade, a treetop, a lamppost with the name of the town inscribed on a lifebuoy) is the literariness of the latter: such images, weighted with unspoken significance, are “nothing but a literary refinement of motifs that Atget discovered” (518). Even photography cannot guarantee the absence of an ethical mode and is at constant risk of being transformed into “literature,” with all the qualities of reference, signification, pathos, and pontification that implies. Its relation to guilt, or “absolute sinfulness,” is quite as complex as that of the novel for Lukács. “It is no accident that Atget’s photographs have been likened to those of a crime scene,” writes Benjamin. “But isn’t every square inch of our cities a crime scene? Every passer-by a culprit? Isn’t it the task of the photographer—descendent of the augurs and haruspices—to reveal guilt and to point out the guilty in his pictures?” (527). Atget achieves the redemption that Lukács longs for, so Benjamin suggests, by affirming the ubiquity of guilt, by the suffusion of his images by guilt.

Redemption, here, is a technical category, not a moral one; it refers to the *inherent circularity* of the photographic process. No photographed object, or being, is ever exhausted by the “guilt”—the conception of knowledge, the intentions—of which it is inevitably the bearer; the “optical unconscious” exonerates the object to precisely the degree that, in other respects, the image may incriminate it. By betraying its own essence, erecting an apparatus of “verbal associations” and “interesting juxtapositions” around its images (527, 526), photography may interrupt the circularity, creating a simulation of ethical, ethnographic, anthropological, or ideological closure; but it can never entirely succeed. It is tempting to suppose that the recent manipulability of the digital image has radically altered this situation—that, by definition, the digital image has no optical unconscious. However, that supposition forgets that the photographic image has an ontological continuity with reality *before it is ever materialized*. It is mistaken in exactly the same way as the notion that the novel is a form that may be exhausted by its “referential” or “ideological” dimensions, that it is condemned to merely “literary” significance.

The inherent circularity of the photographic image enables us to think the inherent circularity of language, and of fiction too. The possibility of forging Lukács’s “new world” depends not on the discovery of a literary form free of the novel’s absolute sinfulness, but on the critical transformation of absolute sinfulness, and indeed redemption, from a moral to a technical category. That transformation is predicated on the insight that language, too, is a “mechanical” apparatus, as “seared” by

reality as the photographic image and as susceptible to ideological, political, and ethnographic reversal as the photograph. The optical unconscious, *pace* Benjamin, is not a quality specific to photography. One of the strategies in the present essay, after all, has been to read even Lukács's *Theory of the Novel* as engaged in a covert argument with its own central thesis: that the novel is a form condemned to pontification and ethical reflection. That covert argument is testament to a discontinuity and heterogeneity within Lukács's own text, evident at moments where, contrary to Lukács's own later negative assessment of the text's "utopianism" and "ethically tinged pessimism" (20, 18), the work attains an ontological thickness and opacity and shows itself receptive to a reading that stresses immanence, materiality, and historical optimism.

At one point in his essay on photography, Benjamin describes Atget's work, and that of near contemporaries such as August Sander, using a well-known quotation from Goethe: "There is a delicate empiricism which so intimately involves itself with the object that it becomes true theory" (520).¹⁵ Like Atget's and Sander's photographs, works of fiction cannot help but involve themselves intimately with the "object," even as they imagine themselves to be engaged in some positive ethical, social, spiritual, or political project, or on the contrary to be, in Lukács's words, trapped in polemic, nostalgia, and abstraction (*Theory* 152). A reading with the grain will attempt to discover this common ontology between the object and the work; to dissolve entirely, in other words, the historical ontology of the text as such, as well as the organizing principle of the work's "expression"; to take seriously Benjamin's injunction to the critic to detach him- or herself, as much as possible, from political or ethical intentions that are announced as such in the text; and to reinsert the work into the moment of our reading of it, the moment of the work's revolutionary power.

Reading with the Grain

What would a reading with the grain, as a critical practice, look like? The short answer is that it would not look like anything, since, in its ideal form, it would amount to thinking the text inseparably from the text; that is to say, thinking its singularity, such that literature would be engaged not as the *representation* of thought, but as thought: a thought without an image. For this reason, any phrase such as "reading with the grain" is deeply flawed; it would be more accurate to posit a reading simultaneously with and against the grain—and yet even this proposition fails to avoid

replacing thought with an “image of thought.” The obligation to produce an example that will illustrate the thesis or the method being proposed is a further illustration, therefore, of the inevitable detraction from thought, the always insistent pressure to substitute the recognition of already existing ideas for thought. That said, it is possible to cite instances of reading that approach, or anticipate, what I have tried to imagine in this essay.

The importance of the precedent established in Deleuze’s work for reading “generously” is difficult to overestimate. One of Deleuze’s former students reports the following piece of advice offered by Deleuze at the opening session of his 1985 seminar on Michel Foucault: “You must trust the author you are studying. Proceed by feeling your way. One must ruminate, gathering and regathering the notions. You must silence the voices of objection within you. You must let him [the author] speak for himself, analyze the frequency of his words, the style of his own obsessions. His thought invents its own coordinates and develops along its own axes” (Colombat 204).¹⁴ Deleuze’s short essay on T. E. Lawrence, “The Shame and the Glory,” offers a model of how such a reading might proceed. Deleuze’s approach to Lawrence is one of sustained attentiveness to the “singularity” of the text, referring the text not to anything outside the text, but to itself—comparing its “vision” with its “non-vision.” The concepts that orient his reading emerge from the text itself. What is important about Lawrence’s *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, for Deleuze, is not its quality of memoir, or testimony, or confession, or the question of its complicity with British colonial ideology, or its insights into the theory of guerrilla warfare, but the degree to which these furnish an occasion for the construction of an apparatus of *thought*—“a machine for manufacturing giants,” Deleuze calls it (118). That construction is effected by the involuntary shame that seeps from Lawrence’s text. Like absolute sinfulness in Lukács, or redemption in Benjamin and Bazin, shame in Deleuze is a technical and historical rather than moral category: not a problem to be transcended or corrected, but a concept that includes, inseparably from it, instructions for dealing with its own iconographic (or in Deleuze’s terminology, “noological”) limitations. Deleuze’s Lawrence, like Althusser’s Marx, is a *reader*—of the Arabian landscape, of the physiognomies of the Arabs and his fellow Englishmen, of the desert light, of his own interiority and capacity for betrayal, and of his bodily responses to all of these. When we read *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, what we read is Lawrence reading: the landscape of Rumm is primarily the landscape of the mind contemplating it (“Shame” 116). Deleuze appears to ignore the historical and political forces in which Lawrence is caught up

and terribly implicated, except insofar as they feed Lawrence's endlessly recursive sense of shame. Lawrence is intensely aware of the limits of his own image-dominated thought—hence his fascination both with seeing and with theoretical abstractions; but, writes Deleuze, “There is nothing behind the images, even the bloody and harrowing ones, except the mind that regards them with a strange coldness” (119). For Deleuze, what is at work in Lawrence's writing is “an infinitely secret subjective disposition” (117), so secret that Lawrence himself is unable to conceptualize it; and yet, it appears on every page, not revealed so much as produced by the exercise of writing. Shame is far more than a subjective emotion in Lawrence; it is an objective entity, the presence of the self to the self, an entity that forces Lawrence to think and out of which the text, too, produces thought—thought without an image. In Deleuze's reading of Lawrence, we see the appearance of something close to an optical unconscious in literature: an affect that becomes noticeable only with the writing; in all probability, it comes into existence only with the writing. Shame is irreducibly both subjective and objective; in Lawrence's shame, the being contemplating and the being contemplated are simultaneous. Much as Lukács might have envisaged, in Deleuze's reading of *Seven Pillars* the work emerges in continuity with the world in which it is read.

The argument here has been that, theoretically, any text can support such an approach. To read politically is to read for the possibility not only that everything truthful has been expunged from the text but that even what has not been expunged, what is visible, has a plurality of meanings—intentionlessnesses—that attest to the text's uncontainability within its own present. These are moments where, to again quote Benjamin on photography, “[T]he future nests so eloquently that we, looking back, may rediscover it.” Althusser writes: “The truth of history cannot be read in its manifest discourse, because the text of history is not a text in which a voice (the Logos) speaks, but the inaudible and illegible notation of the effects of a structure of structures” (“From *Capital*” 17). What this means is not simply that the truth cannot be positively identified in the text—that we are condemned to read oppositionally or counterpositionally in order to find it—but, far more radically, that there is no “text” of history, that is to say, no history, to be read or falsified, buried, unearthed, or recuperated.

As might be expected, models for such reading are easier to come by in the fields of visual and performance art than in literary criticism. I have argued that the possibility of reading a kind of circularity into the relation between form and content in literature is signaled in part by

the inherent “absence of judgment” of the cinematic apparatus, as identified by such figures as Lukács, Bazin, and Deleuze. However, the logic of the argument pursued here would suggest that even theater—ontologically so different from cinema, according to Lukács and Bazin—has the potential to support a circular reading if only the structuring opposition between presence and absence identified by Lukács could be put into suspension. Although it has been largely forgotten, such a suspension was one of the achievements of Brecht’s epic theater, which sought always to remind its audience of the continuity between the event onstage and life outside the theater; to dissolve, thereby, the captivating effect of what Lukács called the “painfully strong ‘present’” of the stage (“Thoughts” 14); or what Badiou, alluding to Brecht, calls “the intimate and necessary links joining the real to semblance” (*Century* 48).

A second image of how a reading with the grain might proceed is offered by the New York–based theater company The Wooster Group, whose 2006 production of Eugene O’Neill’s *The Emperor Jones* follows Brecht in leaving unavailable every site of possible ethnographic, ethical, or ideological identification.¹⁵ O’Neill’s protagonist Brutus Jones, a one-time colonial subject turned exploiter in his turn, is played by Kate Valk, in blackface. Valk, wearing colorful African- and Asian-inspired robes, exaggerates O’Neill’s “Negro” mannerisms and dialogue far beyond mere caricature; the performance thus refuses to undo or absolve the racist caricatures of earlier productions of O’Neill’s play. What is grotesque here is not simply the spectacle on the stage, but the very attempt—by O’Neill’s text, by the earliest productions featuring black actors such as Charles Gilpin and Paul Robeson, and by the Wooster Group production itself—to render the character vivid through racial signifiers: stereotyped gestures, inflections, and intonations. This is not an “ethical” treatment: the discussion of race takes the form not of a denunciation, but of a materialization of the very impossibility of producing the play. For Hilton Als, reviewing the production in the *New Yorker*, Elizabeth LeCompte’s direction and Valk’s performance “[make] it clear that Brutus Jones is a white man’s idea of a Negro.” The Wooster Group production is an homage of sorts, he continues, “to the many black actors before and since Robeson who have had to perform ‘blackness’ in order to be seen.” The project poses the following question: “Minstrel shows, avant-garde theater, is there a difference?” (86). Like Althusser’s readings of Marx, or Deleuze’s readings of Lawrence, the Wooster Group production begins by historicizing *its own positionality* with respect to the text. Theirs is a generous reading of O’Neill, in

which the play's racism is not made the subject of any ethical or political pontification; what is intolerable remains so, without being neutralized by novelistic disquisitions on the limits of tolerability.

We are always reading guiltily; we are guilty insofar as we read, and therefore (of course) insofar as we write. This ubiquitous guilt requires magnanimity. A generous reading, it should be emphasized, is not a sympathetic or an empathetic one, since it presupposes no "standard reading," no ontology of the text to be upheld or overturned. It is as much a writing as a reading; thus, it may gratify, unsettle, or horrify the author whose work provides the occasion for it, but such effects are inconsequential to it. It does not read for ethical or political content, but for the potentiality that inheres in those aspects of the text that are not exhausted by the referential function. Reading generously—with the grain—pays attention to the singularity of the text, the residue of intentionlessness that cannot be comprehended within what Adorno calls the "fatally rectilinear succession of victory and defeat." In such moments, it is our own reading and our own moment that speak to us from the text; in reading, our history has become inseparable from that of the text. The object of study is no longer an object. A generous reading is always, in part, a reading of ourselves reading. The thought it produces is never transferable, recognizable, paraphrasable, applicable, expoundable, or illustratable—meaning that it cannot be detached either from the text itself or from the moment of reading. What we read for—our objective in reading—is *that which in the text enables the present reading*.

"The great epic is a form bound to the historical moment," writes Lukács in *The Theory of the Novel* (152). If his imagined "renewed epic" has any prospect of coming into being, it will be alongside a practice of criticism that regards the text as an event that is continuous with other events (such as the work's interpretation); that understands the ethical categories that structure the work in technical rather than moral terms; that considers the materiality of the text to be a complex that includes the sensorium of the reader, the presuppositions of the critic, and the moment at which the reading takes place among its conditions of production; and that no longer confuses pontification with politics, or the representation of thoughts in literature with a literature that thinks.

I would like to thank Stuart Burrows, Rey Chow, Ellen Rooney, and Elizabeth Weed for helpful comments and suggestions. My attention was first drawn to the problem addressed in this essay during a memorable conversation with Leonard Tennenhouse while poring over graduate applications. It is therefore dedicated to him.

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Notes

- 1 The occasion of the first airing of this essay was a panel titled “Symptomatic Reading and Its Discontents,” organized by Sharon Marcus, John Plotz, Leah Price, and Elaine Freedgood at the American Comparative Literature Conference, Princeton University, in March 2006. The other papers delivered at that session have informed the subsequent development of this essay, and I am grateful to the organizers for the invitation to participate and for their own reflections on these questions. See, in particular, the special issue of *Representations* titled *The Way We Read Now*, edited by Sharon Marcus and Stephen Best; see also Marcus, “Just Reading.”
- 2 For another account of this process in terms of the “novelization” of genres, see Bakhtin 3–12.
- 3 In the genealogy presented by Best and Marcus in their introduction to the special issue of *Representations*, Jameson’s *The Political Unconscious* “popularized” symptomatic reading among American literary critics, enabling it to percolate through a generation of academics—the generation represented in *The Way We Read Now*. Describing themselves as “a relatively homogeneous group of scholars who received doctoral degrees in either English or comparative literature after 1983,” they write further: “We were trained in symptomatic reading, became attached to the power it gave to the act of interpreting, and find it hard to let go of the belief that texts and their readers have an unconscious” (1).
- 4 The main exception to this is Jameson’s reading of Hegel, in which he follows a principle of methodological “generosity” similar to that found in Althusser’s reading of Marx. Hegel’s concept of “Absolute Spirit,” says Jameson, should be read as “a symptom of a historical situation in which his thinking could not go further: less an idea in its own right than an attempt to resolve an impossible historical contradiction, and to project some impossible third term beyond the alternatives of romantic reaction and bourgeois utilitarianism” (51). Such an approach exemplifies the process in which Althusser historicizes his object of study (Marx’s *Capital*) in the light of his own retrospection—a process further epitomized in the beautiful closing lines of Althusser’s contribution to *Reading Capital*: “We even owe it to [Marx] that we can see his weaknesses, his lacunae, his omissions: they concur with his greatness, for, in returning to them we are only returning to the beginnings of a discourse interrupted by death” (“Marx’s Immense Theoretical Revolution” 214)—returning, in other words,

- to a beginning that is continuous with, and partakes of the same discursive reality as, our point of departure in the present moment.
- 5 The introduction of the term *unconscious* at this point in the text also signals Althusser's debt to Freud regarding the structure of the symptom. In a footnote, Althusser explicitly analogizes the reading of Marx he is about to undertake to Jacques Lacan's "intransigent and lucid" theoretical effort with respect to Freud (16n). The clearest exposition of this analogy is Slavoj Žižek's, in the opening pages of *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (11–26): "In both cases the point is to avoid the properly fetishistic fascination of the 'content' supposedly hidden behind the form: the 'secret' to be unveiled through analysis is not the content hidden by the form (the form of commodities, the form of dreams) but, on the contrary, the 'secret' of this form itself" (11).
 - 6 One instance of this reverse procedure of symptomatic reading is found in Mary Thomas Crane's notion of "cognitive reading," a version, as she acknowledges, of symptomatic reading, and that, in an essay included in *The Way We Read Now*, she illustrates in a reading of—precisely—Fredric Jameson's *The Political Unconscious*. The purpose of a cognitive reading is to uncover "[an] author's most basic imaginative conceptualizations of key assumptions about the nature of thought and meaning" (77). In Jameson's case, those conceptualizations are apparent in a range of "spatial metaphors" at work in his text. Crane's explanation for this is simply that "the unconscious is deeply spatial" (77). Cognitive reading demands our acknowledgment of the "spatial underpinnings of abstract thought" (93); it is thus tautological, circular only insofar as it is condemned to find its own predicate (that there is a "spatiality" inherent in all processes of cognition) in the texts it pays attention to. If Crane's "cognitive" reading is a "symptomatic" one (93), it is so only in a debased sense, as a practice destined to unearth only those structures of thought that precede the text as presuppositions of the reading in question.
 - 7 See Badiou, "The Subject Supposed to Be a Christian"; also *Logics of Worlds* 516–17.
 - 8 Such a possibility involves, then, a renunciation of any idea of the text's truth, as well as of practices of reading that proceed on the basis of a stability in what the text might be saying. In this regard, the present essay attempts to enlarge a claim made in the final chapter of my book *Reification, or the Anxiety of Late Capitalism* that it would be possible, in theory, to find evidence for the "reversibility" of all terms and concepts in any text at all, no matter how politically reprehensible or philosophically banal (269). Reversibility in this context designates the radical instability of the text when viewed under the sign of the totality of reification. Our task as thinkers and critics must therefore begin with a rejection of the self-identity of the text and of the very apparatuses of "theory" and "method" with which we habitually approach it.
 - 9 See, for example, *Handbook of Inaesthetics; On Beckett*.
 - 10 Badiou repeatedly acknowledges this difficulty: "Philosophy can be this thinking," he writes, "only if it abstains from *judging* the poem, and most of all, from the wish (even if it is by way of examples borrowed from

this or that poet) of imparting any political lessons based upon it" (*Handbook* 27). We might consider a recent text in which Badiou directly engages the work of Ricoeur as another occasion on which he apparently betrays, or at least imperils, his conception of an event of thought as necessarily heterogeneous to its "discernibility" as such. In a review of Ricoeur's late work *Memory, History, Forgetting*, Badiou distinguishes his own project from Ricoeur's on the basis of the latter's commitment to a subject that preexists its redemption. Badiou ventriloquizes Ricoeur's apparatus of forgiveness, predicated upon the continuity of the subject beyond the acts of which he or she is capable, in the following phrase: "You are worth more than your acts" (27.9). Badiou, whose commitment is to a subject that emerges only exceptionally, in the rarity of the event, specifies the precise opposite: "It can happen, rarely, that your acts are worth more than you." While expressed in *terms* that are substantively "different" from Badiou's Lacanian conception of an ontologically vacant subject, Ricoeur's understanding of the internal inconsistency of the subject, of the subject's separability from his actions, might just as easily have been brought into continuity with Badiou's own proposition of the "difference of the same" as differentiated from it. Furthermore, such an operation would seem to be more strictly consistent with Badiou's idea of "minimal difference," and of the univocity of the real, than this gesture of futile "disagreement."

- 11 In correspondence with Benjamin after the completion of the first draft of Benjamin's essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Adorno chided Benjamin on precisely this issue:

"You underestimate the technical character of autonomous art and overestimate that of dependent art." See Adorno and Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondence* 151.

- 12 Jameson is one of the few thinkers to acknowledge this implication, in the conclusion to *The Political Unconscious* (286); indeed, the idea directly informs his great proposition of a "dialectic of utopia and ideology," as outlined in that text. "To project an imperative to thought in which the ideological would be grasped as somehow at one with the Utopian, and the Utopian at one with the ideological," he writes, "is to formulate a question to which a collective dialectic is the only conceivable answer" (286–87). This proposition has not been explored further, still less made the basis of a critical practice within academic literary studies, and certainly not by the generation of scholars supposedly "trained in symptomatic reading."
- 13 Goethe's aphorism continues: "But this enhancement of our mental powers belongs to a highly evolved age." See also Goethe 307.
- 14 A similar notion appears in a note Deleuze appended to his essay "Dead Psychoanalysis: Analyse," coauthored with Claire Parnet: "Think of the author you are writing about. Think of him so hard that he can no longer be an object, and equally so that you cannot identify with him. [. . .] Give back to an author a little of the joy, the energy, the life of love and politics that he knew how to give and invent" (119).
- 15 The Wooster Group production of *The Emperor Jones*, directed by Elizabeth LeCompte, was first performed in 1993 and then again in 1998, and was revived at St. Ann's Warehouse, Brooklyn, in the spring of 2006.

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