CHRISTOPHER NEALON

Reading on the Left

My essay, like many of the others in this issue, began as a talk for the 2008 conference “The Way We Read Now.” I was included on a panel called “Hermeneutics Without Suspicions?” which raised the question of whether “symptomatic” reading, especially in the wake of Fredric Jameson’s work, was still a relevant or useful model for literary interpretation today (the conference’s subtitle was, “Symptomatic Reading and Its Aftermath”). My paper attempted to disentangle the “symptomatic” from the “suspicions” by way of emphasizing moments in Jameson’s career where he advocates for certain texts rather than out-maneuvers them; my larger aim was to link the hermeneutics of the symptom to a quest on the literary-academic left—sometimes “suspicions,” sometimes not—for models of revolutionary action, or militant comportment, that could replace the traditional Marxist championing of the industrial working class.

What I couldn’t quite articulate at the time, though, were the reasons for a gap I saw between Jameson’s style of “symptomatic reading” and the variety of “symptomatic” reading practices produced and consumed in the United States since the 1970s. The problem was not only that Jameson’s practice of symptomatizing texts did not necessarily seem “suspicions” to me, or to involve an antagonistic relation to the texts he chose to read, but also that, despite his extraordinarily wide influence on literary study in the United States, there seemed to be almost no relation between his work and the other main strands of symptomatizing reading that emerged in the period. At the time, I understood this gap in Jameson’s own terms, as responses to failure—in particular, as readerly responses to the failure of the working class to become revolutionary in the twentieth century. In other words, I interpreted the kinds of symptomatic reading that emerged in the U.S. literary academy in the 1980s as part of a search for something other than a proletariat to valorize.

This seems accurate enough. Now, though, I’m inclined to reframe the matter a bit, and to suggest that the gap between Jameson’s symptomatizing
readings and those of, say, deconstruction and multiculturalism has equally
to do with the long history of anti-Marxism in the United States, which
includes the strong discouragement of academics from Marxist analysis.\textsuperscript{1}
This history of anti-Marxism has yet to be told as a coherent story with
regard to postwar “theory,” and I couldn’t begin to lay it out here. But even if
we keep it in mind as a blunt, underdeveloped proposition, it becomes eas-
ier to make sense of Jameson’s canonicity, since he is best known for a peri-
odization (modern-postmodern) and an axiom (“always historicize!”) that
do not immediately demand adoption by way of Marxist concepts. Jameson’s
great obsession, the problem of the nonrevolutionary character of the twen-
tieth century (or of the nonliberatory character of its revolutions), is easily
set aside when he is read this way.

Ironically, then, it is possible to conduct a survey of American “symp-
tomatic” reading without much recourse to Jameson’s work, since, as I’ll try
to show, what counts as a “symptom” in those styles of reading has little to
do with the notion of the symptom that emerges in the 1970s from within
Marxism. Nonetheless, I think the styles of symptomatic reading that grew
up in the United States in this period retain something that is now, in the
new millennium, coming around to meet that Marxist formulation. So I will
begin with the intra-Marxist Jameson, far though his work lies from the
main line of non-Marxist symptomatic interpretation, as a way of beginning
the story of left-wing literary-academic reading in the period from the 70s to
today. After identifying three variations on symptomatic reading—a Marxist
version, and then two multiculturalist versions, humanist and antihumanist—
I will try to suggest why symptomatic reading in a multiculturalist vein has
been dislodged by forms of reading that lay emphasis on the history of the
present. Then I will compare contemporary theories of what it means to
historicize the present to Jameson’s version, suggesting that they share a
theory of causal necessity that is linked to theories of matter or materiality.
And in closing I will point to ways in which a literary understanding of
“matter,” very different from the philosophical sense that drives historiciz-
ing theory, might help us work toward fresher ways to read now, and to read
“the now.”

The Marxist Symptom

The foundational “symptomatic reading” for twentieth-century
Marxism is actually a friendly reading of a text, that is, Louis Althusser’s
reading of the text of Capital. If Althusser could be said to be “suspicious” in
Reading “Capital”, it is because he is suspicious not of Marx’s text, but of
monocausal, economistic readings of it. Indeed, for Althusser, this is the criti-
cal force of the idea of a symptom: it is more complex than a mere reflection.
I think a certain confusion begins here between two senses of “symptomatic reading”: first, symptomatic reading that allows us to see a text generating a concept of the symptom; and second, symptomatic reading that critiques a text for not being in control of itself. Althusser is reading Marx in the first sense. He is trying to get us to see that Marx’s reading of the commodity in volume 1 of *Capital* takes commodity relations to be, not mere reflections of a single process of exploitation, but rather the complex result of multiple processes that can’t be understood without recourse to an account of the activities of exploitation. In particular, Althusser highlights the way that Marx begins *in medias res*, not with the origins of capital but with its structuring activity, that is, commodity exchange. In this context, the critical advantage of the symptom over the reflection is that one can read texts as a Marxist without having to read them didactically. The need for this kind of reading emerges, in the 1960s and 1970s, as it becomes clear that the working classes of Europe and America may not be the engine of revolution or the subject of history after all, that they are too divided, too defeated, or too distracted to perform the role the revolutionaries of the nineteenth century first imagined for them. To read a text symptomatically in this context means to become more flexible in one’s search for significant historical action in texts: literature can be read as more than a mostly empty repository of revolutionary acts; other acts besides revolutionary ones can be seen as historically significant, or aesthetically important, because of the ways they point to how human history is not only, or not yet, apprehensible as the prehistory of revolution.

This is where Jameson picks up on Althusser, especially in *The Political Unconscious*. Rather than choose a class to blame for the failure of the twentieth century to be the century of liberatory revolutions, Jameson incorporates revolutionary failure into his system of interpretation, and, in doing so, he makes it possible to think about the relationships among forms of historical causality, types of literary activity, and modes of critical reading without hitching those relationships either to the hope that one class will emerge as revolutionary, or to the accusation that it was the action or inaction of one class or another that prevented revolution from coming to pass. The question that haunts left criticism in the twentieth century—why wasn’t this a liberatory age?—still shapes his work, but he refuses any single answer to it.

Jameson’s particular twist on Althusserian reading is to make an analogy between structural causality in the social system and “heterogeneity” or contradiction in literary works: rather than naming other classes, or social formations other than classes, to whose fortunes left intellectuals might pin their hopes, he makes an aesthetic turn that identifies in literary works the kind of fissures that reveal the failure, both of left-wing political hopes and
of the projects of capital to quash them. He brings Althusser, that is, around to the language of literary modernism:

It follows, then, that the interpretive mission of a properly structural causality will... find its privileged content in rifts and discontinuities within the work, and ultimately in a conception of the former “work of art” as a heterogeneous and (to use the most dramatic recent slogan) a schizophrenic text.  

That this aesthetic turn is still shaped by a notion of possible resistance by actual categories of people is made clear, in The Political Unconscious, by the contrast drawn between Althusser and Georg Lukács. For Lukács, the industrial working class was the engine of historical change, and the realist novel was the expression of its emergence, since, regardless of the political orientation of realist novel-writers themselves, the codes of realism demanded an expanded social palette. To move from Lukács to Althusser on aesthetic matters, as Jameson does, is therefore also to imply a post-Lukácsian understanding that heterogeneity in the work of art, even failure, is expressive of the pending problem of there being no obvious successor to the working classes as the engine of history. Jameson’s literary modernism, then, his aesthetics of fissure and failure, is also always a political agnosticism about who might replace the working classes, and a flexibility about how it might be useful to read in the meantime.

This flexibility makes possible a kind of symptomatic reading that is also a friendly reading, along the lines of Althusser’s reading of Capital. Indeed this is the Jameson I know best, the Jameson making what seem like untimely defenses of writers like Jean-Paul Sartre and Theodor Adorno at moments—in 1971, in 1989—when those thinkers seem discredited or superseded. In these moments, a “symptomatic reading” involves figuring out how history and the text have come around to meet each other once again, how what once seemed like weaknesses in an argument, or in a mode of presentation, can come to find new force, or even truth, in a later period. So when Jameson argues, in Marxism and Form, that Sartre’s subjectivism, démodé in the Althusserian ’70s, is actually exactly what the foment of the time calls for; or when, in his book on Adorno, he points out that Adorno’s much-derided quietism, seemingly surpassed by the subversive energies in Michel Foucault, in Jacques Derrida, in Jacques Lacan, is in fact the ground for a kind of dialectical patience that the global rightward shift demands—in these moments, Jameson’s symptomatic style of reading emerges not as a hermeneutics of suspicion but as a hermeneutics of situation—a kind of reading that proposes texts for our attention because they seem useful for historicizing the present.

What’s important here is not so much that Jameson’s readings of Adorno and Sartre are friendly rather than suspicious, but that he models a reading
practice in which what nourishes a revolutionary comportment, or a proto-revolutionary one, will be different under different circumstances. This is another sense in which his reading style can be said to be symptomatic—his own readings are themselves self-consciously symptomatic, that is, complexly and unstably a product of their own time.

I say “unstably” because in The Political Unconscious Jameson works up a highly unstable compound of Althusser and Sartre, old enemies, in order keep the objectivism of Althusser’s “structural causality” from becoming a scientism, even as the Sartrean language of the inert, to which I’ll turn in a moment, threatens to topple that structuralism by positing a matter ontologically prior to human action. But Jameson thinks that it’s worth the intellectual risk: as the global shift to the right gains momentum, he is aware that any persuasive account of the ongoing relevance of Marxism will have to be able to offer critics a reading practice that makes sense of defeat—something the Althusserian model tends to do only in the mode of blame, of blaming would-be revolutionaries for their lapses into ideology. So he turns to Sartre, to a language of Necessity that is meant to be logical but not universally valid, “represented,” as Jameson puts it, “in the form of the inexorable logic involved in the determinate failure of all the revolutions that have taken place in human history” (102). In describing the work of the interpreter, Jameson locates this idea of Necessity in relation to the Sartrean categories of the inert and the practico-inert, which represent, respectively, the dead matter that precedes human labor and the unsettling autonomy of matter once it has been worked on. He writes:

Whatever the raw material on which historiographic form works . . . the “emotion” of great historiographic form can then always be seen as the radical restructuration of that inert material, in this instance the powerful reorganization of otherwise inert chronological material and “linear” data in the form of Necessity: why what happened . . . had to happen the way it did. (101)

Notice the linkage here between the idea of matter as “inert” and the idea of causal necessity. In this Sartrean parable, events can be revealed to participate in causal necessity because matter precedes human action, ontologically and logically: it is there before us, and can therefore be said to have a determinative effect on human action. Since 1981, Jameson’s linkage of causation to a notion of inert matter that awaits “restructuration” has made a good claim to be just what historicizing readers need in an unrevolutionary era: it seems to suit perfectly an era of defeats for the Left. But there is an intellectual and historiographical price to pay for this logicization and ontologization of “matter,” which is that it tends to muffle our ability to understand capital as experimental and uncertain—a feature of its workings that has become central to our understanding of capital in the current
financial crisis. I’ll return to this problem a bit later, since it resurfaces in a different, but equally ontologizing, theory of matter in the era of globalization. Meanwhile, though, there is a second, circumstantial limitation on the explanatory power of Jameson’s method of historicization—which is that in the 1980s and 1990s, many readers on the left were experiencing the era as anything but unrevolutionary.

**The Multicultural Symptom**

Though we tend to frame the 1980s in U.S. political history in terms of the rise of the right, it is also true that those years were the great period of academic multiculturalism in the humanities, the period in which the “culture wars” were won, by and large, by teachers and scholars working to open up the canons of literature (especially American literature) to other voices—“other voices” being both a feminist and an ethnic-studies catchphrase of the period. These struggles, which were not confined to the university, permanently altered the syllabi of children’s literature and high school curricula and, in commercial publishing, opened the way to the more global understanding of literature in English that we now take for granted. Toni Morrison’s Nobel Prize in 1993 was the capstone of this period, serving not only as a recognition of her literary achievement but also as an endorsement of U.S.–style expansions of the literary canon. So a variety of readers would have had cause to experience the category of “literature” in the 1980s as undergoing a “revolutionary” period in the restricted sense that it saw the academic fulfillment of earlier, more properly political struggles.

In the political realm, meanwhile, the period did in fact witness the upsurge of a confrontational, direct-action movement in the form of AIDS activism, which created a generation of activists who became expert not only at organizing mass demonstrations but also in speaking the languages of government health policy, science policy, and even of science itself. The AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP), which spearheaded this activism, had chapters in every major city in the United States, with “affinity groups” devoted to a host of issues affecting people with AIDS; virtually all of the AIDS service organizations in American cities today owe their existence to this period of activism. The epidemic, which fueled particularly vicious forms of homophobia, and suffered alarming neglect by the Reagan and Bush I administrations, produced a militant consciousness in many gay men and lesbians of the time, who were led to rethink not only their relationship to government and its services but also to categories like family and community, which were tested and reworked in the crisis. The catchphrase of the movement, “Silence=Death,” put succinctly the sense that the
epidemic was creating persons with nothing to lose from radicalization; it formed a key part of the protest in the 1987 March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights, which brought more than half a million people to the capital.4

Both the multicultural expansion of the canon and the militancy born of the AIDS epidemic affected literary reading in the 1980s and early 1990s, in ways that form a countercurrent to the Jamesonian story of revolutionary failure. In terms of how these developments fit into the broader story of left politics in the period, I think we can say that two things happened to left-leaning U.S. literary criticism at this point. One was an opening-out of the search for historical actors, either as the new revolutionaries, or as the subjects of modes of action that are liberatory without being punctually revolutionary. The other was a shift from the search for a replacement for the working classes to a sustained critique of the acquisitional middle class. The first describes what I think of as broadly multicultural reading practices, which point to the historical agency of other actors than, say, the white middle-class man; the second set of practices, which took up the tools of psychoanalysis and deconstruction, critique the idea of the autonomy of the liberal political subject that the middle-class white man comes to represent. In the first case, to read critically is to excavate the historical violence, and the causal contingency, by which the liberal political subject achieved his autonomy—by the becoming-significant, for instance, of his race, or his sex—and to leverage knowledge of this violence and contingency to point out that subjects other than the white man can act significantly. In the second case, to read critically is to point out that the indicatively white male political subject, at least as he appears in literary texts, does not in fact enjoy autonomy: autonomy is seen as residing in the textual system, which not only trumps the subject through its systematicity but also carries traces of what that subject can’t bear having made manifest, that is, evidence of his heteronomy. Together these two developments count for much of what we have come to think of as “symptomatic reading” in the United States; against Marxist symptomatic reading, we might indeed call them the two major variations on “American symptomatic reading,” which amount to humanist and antihumanist multiculturalisms.

In different ways, both of these kinds of reading put pressure on the category of “the literary.” Toni Morrison’s 1992 Playing in the Dark, for instance (which is subtitled Whiteness and the Literary Imagination), relies on Freudian ideas about unconscious habits of fetishization, condensation, and displacement in order to develop an account of how white American writers figured blackness by paying attention to the actual depiction of black persons, as well as to the unconscious stress she believes white writers felt in attempting to prevent those depictions from becoming an overwhelming formal problem.
In Morrison’s analyses of white writers’ texts, the pressure to address histories of racial violence threatens to deform those texts, indeed to press them past the bounds of the literary. Reading Willa Cather’s late novel *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940), in which an elderly, disabled, slave-owning white woman becomes obsessed with the possibility that her faithful husband is having sex with a young slave woman, Morrison homes in on the over-determined character of Sapphira’s behavior, which finds no plausible explanation in the novel. As Morrison points out, this behavior makes no characterological, narrative, or historical sense: Sapphira arranges for the slave girl to be raped, hoping thereby to destroy her husband’s sense of pleasure in possessing the girl, Nancy; but we are given no grounds for judging whether Sapphira is paranoid, and in any case, Morrison notes, there was no concept of black women’s chastity in the history of U.S. slave-holding, so that Sapphira’s scheme to have Nancy “despoiled” is incoherent.5

This is a “symptomatic” reading, then, in that it judges the author to be not fully in control of the production of her text. More interesting, though, are the measures by which Morrison assesses this “symptom.” She observes that Cather, almost as if to compensate for the incoherence of plot and character created by the casuistical situation of Sapphira’s evil and Nancy’s virtue, indulges in an epilogue to the story in which, many years after Nancy successfully escapes to the north, a stand-in for the young Cather returns with Nancy to present her to her mother, the former slave Till. In Morrison’s eyes, this only makes matters worse, since the scene of mother-daughter reunion is thus focalized around the young author-to-be, for whom the agony of maternal separation, and the pathos of reunion, become mere staging for the emergent narrative skill of the white child. This is a serious list of literary flaws. What’s startling, then, is Morrison’s conclusion:

The final fugitive in Cather’s novel is the novel itself. The plot’s own plotting to free the endangered slave girl . . . is designed for other purposes. It functions as a means for the author to meditate on the moral equivalence of free white women and enslaved black women. (27)

In this phrasing, the flaws in Cather’s novel make it not a failure, but a loss—the loss of a potential story in the history readers and writers will need if they are ever to come to terms with the heritage of slavery. Morrison’s reading of *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* is symptomatic, and it is critical, but her aim in identifying the symptom is to create space in the American history of race for damaged literary texts. Her narrative is one of healing, though neither the author nor the text can benefit from it; the forgiving of author and text—for forgiveness is what’s at stake—is rather part of a healing process in the history of American racism, which exceeds literary writing. Cather’s novel may have become “fugitive,” barely a novel, but it (and
its author) can now be read as part of an extraliterary history of damage and deformation. To read “symptomatically,” for Morrison, is to set aside “literature” as the master-category of reading.

It takes more effort to track the position of the category of the literary in the deconstructive flank of American symptomatic reading, partly because it does not locate “symptoms” in any one author or text. Where a multicultural reading like Morrison’s exceeds the bounds of “the literary” by way of a humanism that elevates the writer into the position of exemplary personhood (writers, for Morrison, are worth studying on something like their own terms, as writers), deconstructive, antihumanist symptomatic reading is interested in getting behind personhood to the question of what systems or structures shape it, make it possible. But what is at stake in the turn to systems or structures?

Lee Edelman’s *Homographesis* of 1994 is a culminating example of the antihumanist turn in American symptomatic reading—“culminating” because it brings deconstruction back around to the question of the political stakes of reading for actual persons, even as it reserves the intellectual right to understand personhood in terms of textuality. The genius of Edelman’s book is to tell a story in which a whole category of persons in the modern era—gay men—are made to stand in for something like writing and reading: their bodies are understood as especially legible, even as they present problems of legibility recognizable to the professional scholar of literature as problems of interpretive endlessness, of too much meaning. “Homographesis,” for Edelman, is meant to name both the social and cultural processes by which gay men become equated with writing, and the interpretive strategies by which professional gay textual scholars can expose those processes as “reductive” and “repressive.”

For Edelman, the violence of homophobia, at least as it is directed at gay men, is linguistic, in an epistemological and metaphysical sense: homophobia works as a kind of demand in the medium of language that gay men correspond to the hostile fantasies about them. This demand for exact correspondence is not only leveled at gay men, however—Edelman makes clear that straight men’s presumption of wholeness, and self-evident personhood, is bought at the price of masking an ambiguity and open-endedness of language that he thinks is its essential quality. To expose self-identity as containing difference, then, is both to loosen the bonds of homophobia on gay men and to show up the pretensions to uncomplicated masculinity of straight men: they are, gay and straight men alike, both more and less than what the culture has made them out to be (14).

There is an irreducible humanism in this linguistic account of homophobia. In this light, Edelman’s project is cultural, psychological, and historical; indeed it is multicultural. Queer theory, as he puts it, is
the study of the historically variable rhetorics, the discursive strategies, and tropological formations in which sexuality is embedded and conceived; it suggests that the differing psychologies of figuration in different places and at different times bear crucially on the textual articulations and cultural constructions of sexuality; and it suggests that the sphere of gay criticism need not be restricted to the examination of texts that either thematize homosexual relations or dramatize the vicissitudes of homosexual/homosocial desire. (20)

This is a humanist, multiculturalist argument for the expansion of a canon, and for attention to historical and psychological variability. It also contains an antihumanist counter-current, however: in the same paragraph in which Edelman makes his bid for the importance of studying human and historical variability, he writes: “The project of homographesis would locate the critical force of homosexuality at the very point of discrimination between sameness and difference as cognitive landmarks governing the discursive field of social symbolic relations” (20).

So the work of the antihomophobic scholar is a kind of textual scholarship, isolating metaphors (“the very point of discrimination between sameness and difference”)—but the goal, unlike that of traditional textual scholarship, is not to produce the cleanest, most authoritative text. Metaphors are now understood as “cognitive,” that is, in the language of the social sciences (Edelman does not call metaphors “imaginative” or “intellectual” or even “mental” landmarks). Indeed the phrase, “the discursive field of social symbolic relations,” points directly back to Levi-Strauss’s structuralist anthropology, which itself was built out of an analogy to Saussurean linguistics.

In terms of the category of “the literary,” then, this style of reading involves subsuming the specificity of literature under a metaphor of “writing” as legibility, cognition, symbolization, governance, philosophy, and philosophy’s disciplinary anxiety. In a brief reading of Marcel Proust at the beginning of Homographesis, for instance, Edelman interprets a scene in which Proust’s narrator recognizes M. De Charlus’s homosexuality retrospectively as a recognition of “writing itself,” though the narrator’s figure for his belated recognition is specifically of seeing letters assemble themselves into an order—that is, a figure for a socially and educationally specific process of becoming literate (20).

As with Morrison’s humanist symptomatic reading, then, Edelman’s antihumanist reading subsumes “literature” under another category—here, a cognitivized “writing,” to which homosexuality has also been subsumed. In Morrison’s case, the identification of Cather’s symptom is aimed at healing literature, so to speak, by giving it a clearer sense of its history, and thereby allowing literature to move on. It would seem, in Edelman’s case, that gay men are being advised to participate in a perpetual discursive skirmish with heterosexual men and along the way to seize their spectacularized gay
identities, which threaten male heterosexuality so as to make it anxious. This would be a way for gay men to “enjoy their symptom,” as Slavoj Žižek would put it; this is certainly the direction Edelman’s work has taken since the early 1990s.7

The ideas of history behind these humanist and antihumanist multiculturalisms are quite different—one imagines something like progress, the other an endless war of position—but I think they share the confidence of the social movements out of which they grew. One way to confirm this is to compare them with the Jamesonian narrative, which is so emphatically formed through notions of failure. The Marxist symptom and the multicultural symptom are not just temperamental “opposites,” however, one “optimistic” and the other “pessimistic”; they represent two poles in a contradictory historical development. American multiculturalist reading practices grew out of the successes, in the 1960s and 1970s, of the civil rights movement and the new social movements, like feminism and gay liberation, that modeled themselves on it—while Marxist models of historical necessity read the same period in terms of the decline of working-class militancy and social democracy.

Read from a different angle, the tension between Marxist and multicultural models of reading is linked to a contradiction built into the new social movements themselves. On the one hand, they seemed to sidestep the endless factionalism and cumulative defeatism of the European Marxist left: they were grassroots movements without party structures. On the other hand, they tended to forsake a critique of capital as old-style politics and ended up focusing on injury and its repair at the expense of the question of liberation: they became practical, institutional.

As these social movements grappled in the 1980s and ’90s with contradictions external and internal (between identity and the critique of identity; between grassroots organizing and institution building), they became less distinct from liberal civil society, and they gradually lost their grip on the imagination of left-leaning intellectuals. During the same years, however, the profile of global capital emerged with ever greater clarity, bouncing back from the oil shock of 1973 in a trans-Atlantic rightward turn that loosened up market regulations, facilitated the implementation of new, highly speculative forms of “wealth,” and launched migrations of labor across national boundaries on an unprecedented scale. These developments have produced a wholesale abandonment of poststructuralist thinking in the humanistic academy, which has been reduced to fire-sale prices as its advocacy for textuality as a model for culture (or becoming-literate as a model for political activity) seems less and less relevant in what looks like a new era of number. What has emerged instead is a constellation of critical thought that reframes the contradictions of the age of new social movements in terms of a new situation and aggressively reasserts subjectivity as the ground of politics. The model
of reading that has developed alongside this new critical thought is less “symptomatic” than exemplary, as in: who is the exemplary subject in the era of global capital? I would like to outline the features of this latest style of reading in what follows, focusing on how it tries to understand politics through a grasp of the special character of the contemporary, of something like a “situation” that calls for heroic action.

After the Symptom:
Situational Reading

I don’t mean to say that this style of reading is not “symptomatic” in the broad sense of being diagnostic: indeed diagnosis of the contemporary is exactly what motivates it. But it does not read the contemporary scene for indications of a masked or occluded reality; whatever “symptoms” it sees are eminently present. But the urge of this style of reading toward the exemplary makes it hard to describe by way of the “symptom” in a literary sense, since the work I am thinking of—writing by Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, by Giorgio Agamben, and by Alain Badiou—has largely for-gone the operation of reading literary texts in order to reposition them in a wider frame. Instead, this style of reading begins with the assumption that the wider frame, or situation, is the starting point and then turns to literary texts for relatively transparent support for one kind of action or another in that situation. Gone is the attempt at elevating “writing” to a commanding position among the incommensurable disciplines; gone too is the valorization of failure on its own terms. In their place we find a return to reading writers for the kind of personhood they depict or exemplify. So there is a continuity between this kind of reading, which has a strong humanist component, and the humanist multiculturalism of, say, Morrison. But these writers are less interested than Morrison in recuperating ambivalently prog-ressive writing, and more interested in assembling a canon of something like heroes or saints.

The work of Hardt and Negri, Agamben, and Badiou overlap in many ways. Hardt and Negri follow Agamben in developing a concept of the “biopolitical”; Agamben and Badiou have both written books on Saint Paul; Badiou and Hardt and Negri have been at work outlining new forms of mili-tancy to meet the present. There is also significant disagreement among these writers—Badiou in particular is dismissive of both Agamben’s work on Paul, and of Hardt and Negri’s alliance of their concept of “the multitude” with the antiglobalization movement. What they all have in common, though, is an urgent message that a new era has arrived, and a sense that reading, such as it is, must emerge from the urgencies of the contemporary situation.
What the situation is, exactly, differs among these thinkers, and I will sketch their respective senses of it further on. First, though, it’s worth noting a certain irony, which is that the prominence of Agamben, Badiou, and Hardt and Negri on the American literary-academic left can be understood as registering the decline of American exemplarity for European intellectuals. From the mid-1960s to the early 1990s, grassroots politics in the United States held a special place in left-wing European thought: from Herbert Marcuse’s interest in (and adoption by) ’60s youth movements and Guy Debord’s situationist reading of the 1965 Watts uprising in Los Angeles, on through to Derrida’s remark in the mid-1980s that “deconstruction is America,” the United States was a metonym for the possibilities and the contradictions of the period that Jameson, himself making a global exemplar of American art and architecture, helped popularize as “postmodern.” But Badiou’s work is emphatically centered on the politics of France; Agamben’s makes central the experience of the mass murder of European Jews; and Hardt and Negri’s co-authored work emphasizes the theoretical importance of migrant populations around the globe. Whether we understand this turn away from the United States as the result of failures in its multiculturalist and grassroots politics, or of developments outside the United States, it is true that all the most widely circulating theoretical languages for the present are post-American in some sense—and I think this is a significant part of their appeal for Americans, either because they are eager to break from the solipsism engendered by U.S. exceptionalism, or because they are exhausted by hunting for possibilities of resistance from deep within the center of the imperium.

For Badiou, calling for a return to the exemplarity of a militant stance he sees in Saint Paul, the political scene is particularly French, and defined by factional struggles on the postwar left. In the preface to the English-language edition of his 2005 *Metapolitics* he outlines these struggles, fondly recalling the Maoism of the ’70s, when “everyday life was entirely politicized” and “daily activism was the done thing.” This activism was positioned against both the official politics of the French Communist Party and the decay of the spirit of the student uprisings of May 1968, neither of which was as spontaneous as the Resistance of the 1940s (Badiou’s main contemporary model of militancy). For Badiou, everything hinges on an exasperated critique of liberal parliamentarianism, which, politically, tends toward identification of the state with the common good and, philosophically, tends toward the endless expostulation of opinion instead of the pursuit of truth. As he puts it, opinion is “forever disjoined from all truth. We know what this idea amounts to: sophistry . . . sophistry dedicated to the promotion of an entirely particular politics. In other words: parliamentary politics” (14). This distinction between philosophy and sophistry, or truth and opinion, dates to Plato, and
in attempting to establish it as the criterion for an authentic politics, Badiou dismisses the politics of multiculturalism in favor of a small canon of writers, philosophers, and political figures who embodied, in his mind, an ontological resistance to what "is." Mao heads up the list, as does Paul; also present are his own father and a cluster of limit-modernists like Paul Celan, Stéphane Mallarmé, and Samuel Beckett—a canon of literary extremity also dear to the poststructuralists whom he despires (xxxii). What unites these literary figures for Badiou is their placement in situations where the Leninist question of "what is to be done" had an obvious answer, an answer requiring no thought or reflection: resistance happens ineluctably—or, as he puts it, "by logic" (4). Inasmuch as these literary figures are to be "read" at all, they serve as examples of militancy.

I think Badiou’s work has touched a chord among leftist academics in Bush-era America because his exasperation with liberal humanism finds a mirror in the capitulation of the Democratic Party to Bush’s “war on terror,” and the militancy he calls for can be imagined as an antidote to that liberal giving-away of political ground. Obscured in the U.S. context has been Badiou’s bizarre interpretation of his modern locus classicus, the French Resistance, which he leverages, not only against the Marxist concept of class as an engine of historical change, but also against sociability, opinion, thought itself. It is beside the point, he writes in the preface to Metapolitics, “to assign the study of the Resistance to sociological or institutional representations. No group, no class, no social configuration or mental objective was behind the Resistance” (5). Even his sympathetic translator is left to wonder how a politics like this, so insistent on the idea of any reflection at all as liberal nattering, can imagine change (xxii–xxiii).

One answer, it turns out, is poetically. Badiou is appealingly schematic when he describes the historical relations between philosophy and poetry, which he understands to have developed along three lines: a Parmenidean postulation of the oneness of all knowledge, a Platonic exile of poetry from legitimate thought, and an Aristotelian impulse to categorize it. One key to Badiou’s appeal to literary scholars in particular, I think, is the simple but bravura gesture he makes, in Infinite Thought, of introducing a fourth option—which, if you believe there have only ever been three, is breathtaking in its freshness. This fourth relation, which is actually as old as Romanticism, assigns the role of “presence,” or unmasterable intensity, to poetry and rewrites philosophy’s role as occasional visitor to its realm, where it learns commitment.

The literary canon that facilitates such a relation must remain narrow, as you might imagine. Only the most intense of poems can plausibly be taken as establishing this kind of relation to philosophical thought: what could Frank O’Hara teach Plato of commitment? And even in the case of Celan,
certainly unsurpassed in linguistic and experiential intensity, Badiou’s reading assimilates his poems into the category of “poetry” in general, where “poetry” figures ontological excess. He writes:

When Celan tells us:

Wurfscheibe, mit
Vorgesichten besternt,
wirf dich
auf dir hinaus.

Which can be translated as:

Cast-disc, with
Forseeings bestarred,
cast yourself
out your outside.

. . . [this means that] one must be poetically ready for the outside-of-self. For the nomination of an event—in the sense in which I speak of it, that is, an undecidable supplementation which must be named to occur for a being-faithful, thus for a truth—this nomination is always poetic. To name a supplement, a chance, an incalculable, one must draw from the void of sense, in default of established significations, to the peril of language. One must therefore poeticize, and the poetic name of the event is what throws us outside of ourselves, through the flaming ring of predictions.10

Badiou’s assimilation of ecstasis to militancy and his assimilation of poems to “the poetic name of the event” severely contracts the imaginable canon of “poetry” even as it elevates the role of “the poetic” to cochairmanship with philosophy in the sciences of the human. This tiny canon comes at a cost: only by being more militant, more rigorous than Plato himself, it seems, can poetry share space with philosophy. Badiou’s thematic reading of the content of Celan’s poem as getting the reader ready for ecstasis, however, reveals the poem’s secondary status, since upon arrival of the logically necessary event, the militant subject will have no need of poetry, indeed of language, in order to act.

In Giorgio Agamben’s work, the contemporary situation is defined, much as it is for Badiou, as a moment when issues internal to philosophy emerge as the truth of human history. For Badiou that truth is revealed in moments where “logic” supervenes all other considerations to produce blind, heroic action; for Agamben, that truth is revealed in a coincidence between what he thinks of as a conceptual tangle between “biological” and collective life (zoe and bios, in Aristotle), and its manifestation as the overriding political problem of the age. Once again the story of history is assimilated to the story of “Western metaphysics,” although with Agamben it is not
the exile of writing from the authenticity of the voice that defines philosophy and therefore provides the key to understanding history, but rather the undecidability built into the question of whether our humanness is creaturely or political.\textsuperscript{11} The historical event that exposes this undecidability as the new truth of history is for Agamben, as it was for Hannah Arendt, the mass murder of the European Jews, as well as the subsequent refugee crises of the twentieth century. The refugee and the concentration camp prisoner are for Agamben exemplary figures of the human because they force the question of what we are to become, what aspects of “biopolitical” life we are to emphasize if we are to survive as a species. Only the dispossessed, he argues, can make a humane future, because they are unhitched from the ancient viciousness of territoriality. He makes this explicit in a 1994 essay called “We Refugees,” which takes its title (and no little of its argument) from a 1943 essay of Hannah Arendt’s. Describing a cosmopolitan Europe in which nobody would claim citizenship in any state, he writes,

This space would not coincide with any homogeneous national territory, nor with their topographical sum, but would act on these territories, making holes in them and dividing them topologically like in a Leiden jar or in a Moebius strip, where exterior and interior are indeterminate. In this new space, the European cities, entering into a relationship of reciprocal extraterritoriality, would rediscover their ancient vocation as cities of the world. Today, in a sort of no-man’s-land between Lebanon and Israel, there are four hundred and twenty-five Palestinians who were expelled by the state of Israel. According to Hannah Arendt’s suggestion, these men constitute “the avant-garde of their people.” But this does not necessarily or only mean that they might form the original nucleus of a future national state, which would probably resolve the Palestinian problem just as inadequately as Israel has resolved the Jewish question. Rather, the no-man’s-land where they have found refuge has retroacted on the territory of the state of Israel, making holes in it. . . . It is only in a land where the spaces of states will have been perforated and topologically deformed, and the citizen will have learned to acknowledge the refugee that he himself is, that man’s political survival today is imaginable.\textsuperscript{12}

For Agamben as for Badiou, the figure of the Möbius strip is useful for how it is not the dialectic—which, for Badiou, reduces history to mere circularity.\textsuperscript{13} In this passage, the Möbius strip captures what Agamben understands to be the undialectical directness of forms of state power that act on “life itself.” This emphasis on alternatives to the dialectic is key to his thinking. In his work on Saint Paul, Agamben argues that what Paul exposes is an unsynthesizable remnant in human experience, something that the operations of reason cannot overcome or sublate. This remnant can be understood as that which is uncaptured in our collective experience of time, and which therefore perpetually keeps open the possibility of something entirely other, some different experience of time, appearing to us. In his Paul book, the problem of dialectical thinking is that when it is confronted with
this unsublatable gap in human experience, it tries to paper it over—or worse, force it shut. Agamben’s example of this problem is the late dogmatism of Lukács, who faced the gap between theory and political practice, the working classes and the Communist Party, by choosing the party line on its supremacy over the proletariat. In his deployment of these examples and figures, then, Agamben imagines that the undialectizable dispossession of the refugee goes deeper than the exploitation of the working classes, and eludes what he takes to be the dogmatic militancy of a Lukács. In the distance between the figure of the dogmatic Lukács and the sleek topology of the Möbius strip lies the source of Agamben’s appeal in the English-language literary academy: the cosmopolitan replaces the militant and a sense of ontological crisis (what is inside? what is outside?) replaces a theory of revolution.

This antidualitical stance expresses itself in a formalist reading practice that, like Badiou’s, turns to poetry for exemplary instances of an alternative understanding or experience of time. In his book on Paul, Agamben interprets a well-known sestina by the twelfth-century Occitan poet Arnaut Daniel called “The firm will that enters my heart.” He describes the play of rhyme in the form of the sestina as “a soteriological device” that obliges the reader to experience a kind of recurrence that disrupts “linear homogeneous time,” because the six end-words identical to each stanza appear not only in a different order in each of a sestina’s first six stanzas but also one last time, reshuffled and compressed into a final three-line stanza. This property of the form leads him to argue that

the sestina—and, in this sense, every poem—is a soteriological device which, through the sophisticated mécané of the announcement and retrieval of rhyming end-words (which correspond to typological relations between past and present), transforms chronological relations of time into messianic time. (82)

Unlike Badiou, whose universalization of “poetry” from Celan’s poems depends implicitly on an understanding of the urgency of the moment in which Celan wrote—that is, during and after the mass murder of the European Jews—Agamben does not suggest that there is anything about Daniel in particular, or the itinerant status of the troubadour, or the special place of Occitan-Provençal in Ezra Pound’s influential construction of the history of the modern lyric, that leads him to choose this example: indeed he makes no remark on its historical particularities at all. He is not even especially interested in the content of the poem, though arguably, like the other historical details he forgoes inspecting, it might have made the tie between the poem and the letters of Paul (since, after all, the figure of the “strong will that enters my heart” is easily read in religious as well as romantic terms). Instead, Agamben assimilates Daniel’s poem into “the poetic” as
such, collapsing Daniel’s sestina into its form, “the sestina,” and the form into “every poem.” Where for Badiou “the poetic” earns its place by defining a realm inhabited by a small band of poetic militants, in Agamben’s case “the poetic” wins particularity as an instance of language that comes to an end, and which therefore raises philosophical and religious questions about what endings are, as well as what salvation from them might look like (the “soteriological device”). Just as Agamben understands the age undialectically, as a case in extremis of mass dispossession that opens onto the possibility that those in possession (of goods, of land) might one day let possession go, so does Agamben’s soteriological “poem” stage escapes from linear time by becoming a small exemplary case of its disorder: topology become typology.

The intense pressure Agamben and Badiou put on the category of “poetry” to be a lever for understanding the urgency of the present makes one wish not only for the liberation of actual poems from such frameworks but also for a more nuanced understanding of the contemporary “situation.” Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, among the theorists of the present who have enjoyed wide popularity in the U.S. literary academy, certainly provide this. This is partly because, alone among the theorists of the contemporary who have achieved the widest readership, they tell a comparative story, a story that links Europe and the United States to the global south. And because they take the idea of “the global” seriously, they are much more wide-ranging in their examples of political activism and militancy than either Badiou or Agamben.

They are also more dialectical. The story they tell about the current state of capitalism is of capital responding to the creativity of workers by retooling itself to meet a situation that workers alter. It is a story they tell and retell from different angles, but the central version of it involves linking traditional labor struggles with youth struggle, linking struggles over the means of production with a reworking of what counts as production in the first place. It begins as a story about labor unions and young people in the global north in the 1960s and 1970s and the pressure they put on capitalism:

The social struggles [of this period] not only raised the costs of reproduction and the social wage (hence decreasing the rate of profit), but also and more important forced a change in the quality and nature of labor itself. Particularly in the dominant capitalist countries, where the margin of freedom afforded to and won by workers was greatest, the refusal of the disciplinary regime of the social factory was accompanied by a reevaluation of the social value of the entire set of productive activities. The disciplinary regime clearly no longer succeeded in containing the needs and desires of young people. The prospect of getting a job that guarantees regular and stable work for eight hours a day, fifty weeks a year, for an entire working life, the prospect of entering the normalized regime of the social factory, which had been a dream for many of their parents, now appeared as a kind of death. The mass refusal of the disciplinary regime, which took a variety of forms, was not only a
negative expression but also a moment of creation, what Nietzsche calls a transvaluation of values.15

This emphasis on the creativity of refusal by young people in the postwar global north has two significant meanings for Hardt and Negri, both of which they italicize. First, they take this refusal as evidence that “[this] ‘merely cultural’ experimentation had very profound political and economic effects”—by which they mean a range of developments, from the creation of a “youth market” to the expansion of a service sector designed to meet new desires (274). Capital, that is, was obliged to respond to what Hardt and Negri think of as “new subjectivities.” Second, they take the example of youth counterculture as a signal instance of “change from below”—or, as they put it, “Capital did not need to invent a new paradigm (even if it were capable of doing so) because the truly creative moment had already taken place” (276).

But Hardt and Negri’s scenario of youthful creativity as the engine that drives changes in capital begs two questions. One, is this kind of creativity available to more directly exploited populations? And two, what does it mean to call “creative” a refusal that is met so emphatically with a subsumption? That is, why emphasize the creativity of youth culture when it so quickly became a mere market?

In answering these questions, Hardt and Negri tread lightly on the causal links between the rise of new forms of labor in the global north (which they call, in rotating fashion, “post-Fordist” labor, “affective labor,” and “immaterial labor”). In this they lag behind thinkers like Gayatri Spivak, who in 1985 had already pointed out that new information systems, which sped up the flow of data in the north and made possible a futurist vision of the home office and the telecommute, were causing an intensification of exploitation in the global south, essentially a work speedup in response to sped-up demand in the north.16 Like Spivak, however, Hardt and Negri draw attention to the becoming-parallel of exploitative processes in north and south, so that the growth of the service sector in the north, which obliges workers to give over their creativity to seeming nice, or to solving minute problems of client whim, is part of the same process by which the dispossessed of the south are forced into creatively defending their livelihoods and their resources. For Hardt and Negri, “creativity” in the south looks different, both because the global poor of the south are often the guardians of traditional knowledge that benefits everyone and because they are on the front lines of struggles that implicate everyone. Hardt and Negri’s examples stress battles to preserve biodiversity, which they call a form of “wealth” especially concentrated in the global south.17

As for the question of why we should construe as “creativity” the kinds of refusals of life under capital that seem simply to breed more sophisticated
responses from capital’s machinery, Hardt and Negri have a slightly unstable answer that splits the difference, you could say, between the social and the ontological. They clearly believe that the priority of inventiveness from below, however constantly it is met with counter-invention by capital, gives those “below” the edge in seizing their situation and changing it. This seems a perpetual condition of social relations since the rise of capital. But they also seem to believe that this era is special because of the way capital has been obliged to take hold of affect, of creativity, in ever more “immaterial” ways, raising the possibility that the intensification of capital into the realm of the “biopolitical” will trigger a massive rejection of its demands, since capital may be approaching too close, as it did in the era of child labor, to a kind of absolute exploitation.

The persuasiveness of these arguments has been at issue since the publication of Empire in 2000, perhaps no more acutely than in Gopal Balakrishnan’s early and pointed observation that the difference between the multitude and the empire is not so much that the multitude is inventive and empire reactive, but that the empire has more guns.18 I am going to demur, however, from the question of whether Hardt and Negri have an effective political program to propose (they don’t claim to).

I’d like to spend a moment, instead, to suggest what might be the appeal of work like Empire and Multitude for readers in the literary academy. I think it lies in Hardt and Negri’s argument that, as capital is obliged to colonize more and more “immaterial” aspects of the labor process, commodifying affect, bodily comportment, information, and knowledge, this colonization deforms older class categories and makes it harder to describe the world in terms of an industrial proletariat and a capitalist class. In Multitude, they call this “the socialization of all the figures of labor,” meaning that older categories—peasant, proletariat, service worker—are alike caught up in new imperatives of capital so that “the struggles of each sector tend to become the struggle of all” (125). Though they caution that this “socialization” does not mean that all struggles are alike, or that all exploitation is equally intense, their stance clearly makes room for the affect-workers of the northern literary academy to imagine themselves in alliance with the exploited of the global south.

Hardt and Negri’s concept of the becoming-social of labor finds expression in the composition of their two books as well. One thing to notice about Empire and Multitude is that they incorporate a far wider canon of texts than do Agamben or Badiou: they include quotes from ancient and modern literary sources, from popular songs, from political thinkers and economists. Interestingly, though, Hardt and Negri make almost no space for poetry in their work, perhaps because the modern lyric, the most extractable form, lays greater emphasis on individual subjectivity than on the kinds of collective experience Hardt and Negri are interested in tracking.
This move in the direction of culling prose sources across fields and genres also leads Hardt and Negri away from the close reading of literary texts. Instead, they strew mention of them throughout *Empire* and *Multitude* in the forms of anecdote, epigraph, sidebar, and what they call “excurses.” The overall effect of this incorporation of literary material into the two volumes is that each citation carries a lighter burden of exemplarity, and takes on the ready-to-hand character of the aphorism. In pursuing this activity of literary assemblage, Hardt and Negri prove themselves humanists in a textual sense: among other things, *Empire* and *Multitude* are left-wing commonplace books, stuffed full of aphorism, products of the kind of rhetorical invention that reassembles texts to suit an occasion: indeed at the end of *Multitude*, they make specific recourse to the idea of *kairos*, or occasion, in order to highlight that they do not have a political program, that program making is the job of activists, but that they are calling for a kind of *reading* that helps prepare for, and clarify, activism (357). This inventive textual practice, and its relation to a sense of situation, is perhaps best encapsulated in the very first of their hundreds of citations, a song lyric by Ani DiFranco that appears on the front page of *Empire*: “Every tool is a weapon if you hold it right.” So the concept of creativity and inventiveness that is Hardt and Negri’s key to rethinking capital, and the source of the most controversy in their work, has a literary and rhetorical corollary in how they put their books together: they tell a story of inventiveness by way of sustained textual invention.19

**Criticism, “Theory,” and Matter**

I conclude my survey of contemporary “reading on the left” with Hardt and Negri not only because their work, among the major critical theories of the day, offers the most thorough account of the present, but also because it completes a certain critical arc that begins with Jameson. As with Jameson’s work, Hardt and Negri’s is rooted in an understanding of capital that hinges on the question of the priority of matter and labor. Their emphasis on the primacy of laboring creativity, which has a fifty-year history in Italian *operaismo* (“workerism”), and which has philosophical roots in Spinoza’s monism, is a precise counterposition to the Sartrean materialism of Jameson, which gives “inert” matter priority over human praxis. So we could say that these two accounts of literature’s relation to history and politics since the ’70s, because they are so firmly rooted in philosophical accounts of matter and labor that worry the question of which comes first, leave us in a kind of manic-depressive readerly situation, where we are invited to read according to whether postproletarian social movements—multicultural, antiglobalizing—are failures awaiting redemption, or upsurges of irrepressible creativity. Either way the post-1968 history of reading on the left, viewed
in this light, becomes a history of rushing—first with high hopes, then in
disappointment—from one potential exemplarity to the next.

I would like to propose that we literary critics consider another option,
which, put most briefly, is the option of thinking of ourselves as literary crit-
icos, instead of as “theorists,” or activists. Activists we may become—wonderful
to think!—but the kinds of things we might learn, in developing literary-
critical knowledge, seem to me to have a different relation to politics and
history than what was on offer in the age of “theory,” which tried to mediate
between criticism and activism by imagining the relation between the two
as necessary, or as definitional (not least in a compressed code that went:
writing-is-reading / reading-is-literacy / literacy-is-empowerment / empower-
ment-is-activist). In fact, as I hope I’ve managed to suggest, “theory” tended to
assimilate literary texts, not to politics, but to philosophical questions about
necessity, or about universality and particularity. So let me turn for a moment
to a defense of literary criticism that slightly predates the left-wing reading I’ve
outlined here.

In 1957, at the height of the Cold War, Northrop Frye argued in the
“Tentative Conclusion” to *Anatomy of Criticism* that “no discussion of beauty
can confine itself to the formal relations of the isolated work of art; it must
consider, too, the participation of the work of art in the vision of the goal of
social effort, the idea of complete and classless civilization.” Lest he be mis-
taken for a Communist, Frye makes clear that his understanding of “class” is
Arnoldian, not Marxist; “classlessness” in this account amounts to urbanity,
to good taste. But alongside the rear-guard action in Frye’s formulation
there exists a progressive truth, which is this idea of the participation of “the
work of art” in imagining society as other than itself. This is what Jameson
means when he writes, retooling Frye in *The Political Unconscious*, that “no
matter how weakly, . . . all literature must be read as a symbolic meditation
on the destiny of community.” Note that this is not a definition of litera-
ture; it identifies in literature something Jameson thinks we must attend to.
For Frye and Jameson alike, criticism tracks literature; they have a mimetic
relation, and negative, “symptomatic,” or even antagonist readings by critics
of literary texts do not change this relation—they merely strike different
notes on its scale.

What this suggests to me is that the more deeply we allow ourselves to
understand literary texts as being written out of histories of struggle, of liber-
ation, of toil, the less pressure we will feel to read them “theoretically,” to
super-add an activist orientation to them, since they will all the more clearly
be documents of a history of human struggles to be free—not least free, for
readers of nineteenth- and twentieth-century writing, of the consequences of
capitalist exploitation. One thing that emerges, when we allow ourselves to
imagine a mimetic relation between literature and criticism along the axis of
“the destiny of community,” is the possibility that reading literary texts for marks of how they imagine themselves as literary, as part of the history of literature, is not only self-referential, but referential of literature’s shifting position in the history of “social effort.” I think allowing for the simultaneously social and intraliterary orientation of our objects of study at the outset places the search for scholarly objectivity on firmer footing: objectivity is to be found not in the ability of literary scholars to read texts from frameworks that bear no trace of the objects they study, but in the historical story that emerges when we read texts for how they participate in the history of what, at different times and places, “the literary” has meant.

There are many avenues along which we might construct histories of the literary imaginary of literary texts. Because the frame of my essay has been the post-1960s history of “reading on the left,” though, I’d like to highlight one possibility in particular. I have tried to suggest that the strong situational forms of reading that bookend the last third of the twentieth century depend on theories of matter bound up in what comes first—matter “itself,” or human action upon it? I have also tried to suggest that this logical and ontological problem is not well suited to confront the problems of materiality with which literary history presents us—that the philosophical phrasing of what matter is does not match very well the history of literary objects imagining themselves to be one kind of “matter” or another. I have also argued that the political comportment we are invited to adopt by Jamesonian and Negrian materialisms (or Sartrean and Spinozan materialisms) has tended to fork, metahistorically, in the late twentieth century: we should read for optimism or pessimism, or (put modally) for tragedy or comedy. So I feel enabled by work like Jameson’s, and Hardt and Negri’s, to understand literary history as part of a broad history of social and political struggle, and eager to expand our understanding of “political struggle” so as to include under its rubric struggles to survive, to love, to live in safety and in joy that may not at first have seemed “political” per se. And I am convinced that to read literature as part of a human struggle to be free necessarily includes reading literature for its engagement with “matter”—with its production, its appearance, its working and reworking. But I think we need an account of literary materialisms closer to the ground of literary history than what is on offer by the strongest left-wing theoretical materialisms, which quickly become full-on philosophies of history before they have really absorbed the particulars of literary history (which, after all, may seem a mere by-way or rest stop in the rush to theorize History, capital H). I don’t mean that the “literary” is a single thing, or an unconstructed thing, or that it is not riven by internal contradictions; but I think there is a record, in the writing we have come to call “literary,” of how that writing conceives of its literariness, and I think that record could inform a history of “matter” that makes more
sense for literature. My own investigation into this question in the archive of twentieth-century poetry in English suggests, for one thing, that the history of poetic materialism is less heroic, less clearly tragic or comic, than the theoretical accounts would suggest, and more scattershot, more ad hoc, and more protective of “poetry” than prescriptive of political action. It is also more linked than we might think to the educational traditions by which written poetry has been made part of the body of “literature” in the West—more linked, that is, to the long history of poetry as a tool and occasion for the teaching of rhetoric and grammar, where “matter” has its own meanings.

**A Poem**

I’d like to conclude with a brief reading of a contemporary poem. Poetry is underrepresented in the post-1968 English-language literary criticism of the Left, even as it has emerged, at least in North America, as an extremely fine-grained and inventive medium for understanding the present—not least the present in which capital has achieved the spectacular form Guy Debord described for it in 1967, where the awesomeness of capital’s productive power mediates all social relations. So while I don’t mean for the poems that follow to bear excessive exemplary weight, I do think there’s an interesting story to be told about twentieth-century poetry and twentieth-century capital. And one chapter of this story has to do with how English-language poets since the 1980s have deployed figures of literacy and reading, not as “postmodern” or self-referential tropes, but as indices to the history of poetry and to how its assembly of textual “matter” competes with the massive organization of matter under capital. This is true when Michael Palmer writes, at the beginning of his astonishing 1988 poem “Sun,”

Write this. We have burned all their villages
Write this. We have burned all the villages and the people in them
Write this. We have adopted their customs and their manner of dress

Or when Lyn Hejinian, in her 1994 volume *The Cold of Poetry*, writes,

“Depress the world”
with true literary realism—that is, words
as they arc

Or when Harryette Mullen writes, in the *abécédaire* (called “Jingle Jangle”) she includes in her 2002 collection, *Sleeping with the Dictionary*,

Backtrack backpack Bahama Mama balls to the wall bam-a-lam bandstand
Battle in Seattle beat the meat bee’s knees behani ghani best-dressed.
All these poems, which are in conversation with the influential avant-garde movement called “Language Poetry,” riff on figures and concepts of the acquisition of literacy in order to investigate what kind of “matter” poetry might be—and, often explicitly, to set that matter against other “matters” that seem to operate on a much larger scale (Vietnam, in Palmer’s poem; or “the world” in Hejinian; or the “Jingle Jangle” of spectacular noise that includes “The Battle in Seattle,” in Mullen).

The poem I’d like to look at, which participates in this recent poetic history, is from Lisa Robertson’s 2001 book *The Weather*. Robertson grew up poetically in the very active scene around the writer-organized Kootenay School of Writing in Vancouver, though she now lives in the United States. *The Weather* grew out of research into what Robertson calls “the rhetorical structure of English meteorological description.” Written during a fellowship at Cambridge University, it cites and reworks language from BBC shipping forecasts, Sprat’s *History of the Royal Society*, Wordsworth’s *Prelude*, and William Cobbett’s *Rural Rides*, among many other sources. It is prefaced with a passage from the *Arcades Project*: “Architecture, fashion—yes, even the weather—are, in the interior of the collective, what the sensoria of organs, the feeling of sickness or health, are in the individual.” The book is organized in sections named for the days of the week, punctuated by shorter parts called “Residence at C__.” Here is one of those parts:

Give me hackneyed words because
they are good. Brocade me the whole body
of terrestrial air. Say spongy ground
with its soft weeds. Say self because it can.
Say arts of happiness. Say you have died.
Say sequin because the word just
appeared. Say weather take this adult
from its box. Memorize being sequined
to something, water. Everything you forget
inserts love into the silent money.
Memorize huge things of girders greased. Say
the water parting about the particular
animal. Say what happens to the face
as it gala tints my simple cut
vicious this afternoon the beautiful
light on the cash is human to guzzle
with—go away wild feelings, there you go
as the robin as the songsparrow go
the system shines with uninterrupted
light. It’s petal caked. Leaves shoot up. Each
leaf’s a runnel. Far into the night a
Clouded towards the south. It translates
Lucretius. Say cup of your heart rush
shuice is yellow sluice Kate Moss is Rousseau
have my arms. Say impasto of
atmosphere for her fur. Halo open
her face. Misplace the death. All the truth
under the tree has two pinky oozy
names. Say trying to possess or not. Say
if you thought love was ironical. If
pleasure emancipates, why aren’t you some-
where. Sincerity.26

The poem begins in praise of deep mundanity, of the “hackneyed words”
about the weather that we use to pass the time, placeholder language that
keeps us in each other’s company though it may not carry lots of informa-
tion. But the weather is a topic, in the old sense of a topic in rhetoric, and
the rest of the poem plays with the idea of poetry as a school art, medium
for rhetoric but also for grammar and for elocution. It is written largely in
imperatives: Say this, say that. Memorize. “It translates / Lucretius”—the
most didactic poet on the least exotic subject, the nature of things. The
poem is engaged in something like a humanist project of stylistic pedagogy,
arranging utterances in anthology form. It is itself, I think we can say,
hermeneutical: the reader of the poem is not the only one doing the work
of interpretation.

The poet is also engaged in a memory practice, in the form of an
anatomy of pleasures she is worried she’ll forget. It’s an anatomy not only of
“the whole body / of terrestrial air” but also of the “self,” the “adult,” the
“particular animal”—its face, its haircut, its feelings, its heart, its arms. Mem-
orizing these, the poem suggests, is a stay against the problem of money; but
money is fused with the medium of perception, light:

   Everything you forget
   inserts love into the silent money.

   the beautiful
   light on the cash is human to guzzle
   with
   
   the system shines with uninterrupted
   light.

Robertson seems to be saying that any lapse of our attention to what we love
hurries love off to capital; she is noticing that it is perfectly human to want
to soak up the light, but that whatever it falls on, it is always falling on cash,
so that one cannot perceive without ingesting it; and she is saying that there
is no pause in the light, so that to seek pleasure is to become sutured—‘sequined,’ in the poem’s language—to an unending process that sounds a lot like the spectacle.

Robertson’s speaker is a feminist, and she wants to believe in a politics of the body and its pleasures, but the twining together of beauty to money has left her dismayed:

If
pleasure emancipates, why aren’t you somewhere. Sincerity.

So what, as they say, is to be done? The poem does not answer this question, but the one it does pursue may be more appropriate to literary criticism: what’s going on? I think poetry is especially useful as a record of how print textuality, passed down to us out of a humanist configuration of rhetoric, grammar, and criticism, is constantly being refigured and retooled into new forms of textual matter so as to meet what capital makes into material. Some poetry seeks to keep up with it, to outmaneuver it; some poetry seeks to stave it off; some poetry seeks homoeopathic contact with it, so as to make itself immune to it. These relations are all experimental, and they are liable to failure; indeed, in a Sartrean mode we should expect them to fail. But their failure is not the most interesting thing, or even the most literary-historically important thing about them. Even if revolution remains the limit-horizon against which we measure literary dreaming, its wishes for arcadia or its visions of suffering, that does not mean that the critic has only the measure from text to revolution to name. We don’t know what revolution will look like, what it will seize hold of, because the history of the capture of material life by capital, and of resistance to it, is still being written. And in any case, cultivating revolutionary consciousness may not be a job we need to do; the comment boxes underneath the articles on the subprime mortgage fiasco show clearly enough that in a crisis, everyone is capable of systemic thinking. But we may be the best trained in the custodial job of maintaining and arranging texts according to the anatomies they suggest, and the questions they pose: do feelings move as fast as money? Does language? Assembling the textual body that tracks these questions, even if they shift like clouds, can help us rethink the meanings of literary and rhetorical materiality; and I think we can learn from this assembly a little bit about the workings of another “matter”—matter in the sense of the deeds of a mighty protagonist, as Arthur’s were known by the name The Matter of Britain, or Charlemagne’s The Matter of France. I think if we can learn to read the weather we will better understand The Matter of Capital.
Notes

1. There are many measures by which to gauge this history of American anti-Marxism. Employees of the State of California, for instance, must still sign, in 2009, a “loyalty oath” that, while it no longer obliges the signer specifically to declare that she has never been a member of the Communist Party, is nonetheless shaped by the anti-Communism of the Cold War. This history also registers in the common gesture by which liberal intellectuals in the English-speaking world discount Marxist thought by depicting it as brainwashing, “ideology,” or hysteria—anything but intellection. A good example of this kind of work is Mark Lilla, The Reckless Mind: Intellectuals in Politics (New York, 2001).


4. The archive of AIDS activist work was itself built in a movement context, but there is of course a large body of academic work on it by now. The best history of the intersection of activism and medical policy remains Steven Epstein, Impure Science: AIDS, Activism, and the Politics of Knowledge (Berkeley, 1998). For a collection of influential essays that were written on the ground during the first decade of the epidemic in the U.K. and the U.S., see Simon Watney, Practices of Freedom: Selected Writing on HIV/AIDS (Durham, NC, 1994).


10. Alain Badiou, Infinite Thought, ed. Oliver Feltham and Justin Clemens (London, 2005), 75.


19. In this practice of assemblage and invention, Hardt and Negri’s work parallels two developments in contemporary literary studies: a shift in the scale of reading, driven both by technologies of digital reproduction and data storage, which make it possible to develop new forms of pattern-recognition across many more texts than could be carefully read by a single scholar, and by a new comparativism, which insists on tracking the often-surprising circulation of texts across linguistic and geographical divides. Franco Moretti’s recent work on the novel, and Wai-Chee Dimock’s research into the “deep time” of circulation, are defining examples of these new developments. See Wai-Chee Dimock, *Through Other Continents: American Literature Across Deep Time* (Princeton, 2006), and Franco Moretti, *The Novel*, 2 vols. (Princeton, 2006–7).


