

Literature, Immanent Critique, and the Problem of Standpoint

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What follows is a rough and condensed sketch of the central argument in a larger work-in-progress that goes for now under the probably grandiose title of "Principles of Immanent Critique." My most immediately practical aim in writing such a work is to make available to the public, and especially to students, the outline of a proposed method for critical theory in the humanities and "cultural studies" generally, and, more particularly, in relation to literature as a possible critical-theoretical object. The preliminary thinking behind this project is the result of roughly ten years of teaching critical theory in both graduate and undergraduate classrooms. During this time, I came to distrust and finally to reject the now-standard, eclectic pedagogy, reflected in most "theory" primers and introductions, in which the various schools of "theory" as conventionally identified — from feminism to poststructuralism to Marxism and psychoanalysis — are explicated one by one. Of course, students, especially those looking for academic work, need to know these things, but the intellectual result of presenting critical or "literary" theory as, say, all that fits between the covers of the *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* is, whatever else it may be, antithetical to the very concept of theory itself, which must insist, as a methodological postulate, on its own universality and exclusivity in relation to its object. Teaching the various schools "critically" — say, from the standpoint of Marxism or feminism, however either of these standpoints is to be defined — can, in principle, avoid this pitfall, and this has, de facto, been my own practice in the "theory" classroom. But to practice even this critical, metatheoretical method in a consistent and rigorous way will still require advancing not only what amounts to a critical theory of "theory" itself (something I'm also working up as a kind of companion piece to "Principles of Immanent

Critique”), but also that one be able to explain, from one’s own theoretical standpoint, the procedure whereby valid intellectual results are to be obtained. It is, surely, a basic criterion of theory that its truth be reproducible by anyone who takes up its standpoint and thinks through and by means of its axioms and categories — which is as good as saying, reproducible by anyone expected to learn it. If so, then this is a criterion that what passes for theory in the humanities fails, abjectly, to meet. *Critical* theory, if it is to be consistent with its own principles, has to conduct itself differently.

I begin this exposition somewhat awkwardly by laying out two seemingly disparate problems, or points of departure. The first is explicitly theoretical and probably in “bad” abstract form at this point, but it frames the whole of what I will be discussing here: in what do the theory and practice of immanent critique consist when in specific relation to cultural and, in particular, to literary objects? What are its basic methodological principles in relation to such objects? I take as given, and in no particular need of argument here, the principles of immanent critique in the case of the critical social theory, inaugurated and still epitomized by Marx’s *Capital*, in relation to its object: the reified social form of capitalist modernity. Immanent critique in this form, to cite Moishe Postone’s lucid and succinct formulation in *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*,

does not judge critically what is from a conceptual position outside its object — for example, a transcendent ‘ought’. Instead, it must be able to locate that ‘ought’ as a dimension of its own context, a possibility immanent to the existent society. Such a critique must also be immanent in the sense that it must be able to reflexively grasp itself and ground the possibility of its own existence in the nature of its social context. That is, if it is to be internally consistent, it must be able to ground its own standpoint in the social categories with which it grasps its object, and not simply posit or assume that standpoint. The existent, in other words, must be grasped in its own terms in a way that encompasses the possibility of its own critique: the critique must be able to show that the nature of its social context is such that this context generates the possibility of a critical stance towards itself. It follows, then, that an immanent social critique must show that its object, the social whole of which it is a part, is not a unitary whole.¹

Postone goes on to argue that the full development of Marxian immanent

critique in *Capital*, because it entails the situating of its own standpoint within its historical object, also implies the historical specificity of theory itself:

This implies the necessity for a new, self-reflexive sort of social critique. Its standpoint cannot be located transhistorically or transcendently. In such a conceptual framework, no theory — including Marx’s — has absolute transhistorical validity. The impossibility of an extrinsic or privileged theoretical standpoint is ... not to be contravened implicitly by the form of the theory itself.... *Capital*, in other words, is an attempt to construct an argument that does not have a logical form independent of the object being investigated, when that object is the context of the argument itself.²

It is immediately evident from the above that the question of what constitutes an immanent cultural or literary critique already and necessarily implies prior, more fundamental ones: What, for example, is the precise, determinate relationship of “literature” as an object — if any — to the socially and historically specific object of critical theory as social theory (or, as Postone often puts it, of immanent *social* critique)? Can “literature” itself be understood, in any determinate or conceptually precise way, as a “nonunitary whole”? What, then, would be its internal contradictions? And — perhaps summing up all of the above questions — what would constitute the *standpoint* of immanent critique in the case of a cultural or literary object?³

These are not new or unfamiliar questions. Critical theory and Marxist literary criticism generally have grappled with them in one form or another from their earliest beginnings. But the breadth and richness of the answers contrasts with what has simultaneously been a deficit of methodological clarity, rigor, or consensus regarding the fundamental principles and categories of an immanent critique of literature and their precise, dialectical order of determination. Much of the most widely read Marxist, and purportedly dialectical, literary theory and criticism, particularly in its French and Anglo-American variants, bears little if any relationship to the general principles of Marxian immanent critique as outlined above by Postone, and reduces, at best, to the level of an ideology-critique in which literature is read off as just one more superstructural effect. One would be hard-pressed to find in Raymond Williams, Pierre Macherey, or Terry Eagleton, say, anything remotely resembling a theoretical critique “undertaken from a standpoint that is immanent to rather than outside its object of

investigation.”⁴ The most significant exceptions here, lying closer to the Central European cultural center of Hegelian-Marxism and critical theory proper, are Lukács and Adorno, who both had made systematic efforts to integrate literary and aesthetic criticism within the general dialectical principles of immanent critique. Nevertheless, it is symptomatic here of the same methodological deficit, even if on a higher plane, that works such as *The Historical Novel* and *Aesthetic Theory* stand in such a diametrical — and dialectically unmediated — opposition to one another. Lukács, in particular, *qua* early-twentieth-century Marxism, and the more methodologically orthodox, gave the most unequivocal answer to the question of standpoint — that of the proletariat as revolutionary class. But it is an answer that has now effectively fallen victim to historical developments whose own immanence the Lukácsian aesthetic theory did not, and perhaps could not, detect. This is not, in my view, because the claims Lukács lodged in *History and Class Consciousness* on behalf of the “standpoint of the proletariat” were overly messianic or “idealist,” but because, as the contemporary crisis of capitalism arguably makes clear, no class, but only the classless society itself, indeed the very possibility of the social in the face of the social exterminism of capital, could redeem them. Adorno’s critical and aesthetic theory has seemed to fare better in the late modern conjuncture, and it is unquestionably to Adorno that one must turn first and above all in search of the principles of an immanent literary or aesthetic critique. But given Adorno’s skepticism regarding method itself — something reflected in the often cryptic, paradoxical, and “methodically unmethodical” reflections on the methodological immanence of critique to be found in even the most explicit of his writings on this subject — the search for a truly dialectical standpoint here will prove to be both arduous and highly problematic in itself.⁵ As I have argued elsewhere, Adorno sensed more acutely than any other thinker then or since the immanently negative, dialectical truth of art and culture on the level of the concrete work or cultural phenomenon.⁶ But he framed his own essayistic and aphoristic acumen in terms of a monolithic, effectively underhistoricized social and political theory (what Postone has termed the “critical pessimism” of the Frankfurt School) that in turn forced his critical theory, at precisely its most powerful and richest moments, into a form tending to methodological unreproducibility.⁷

Rather than confront the problem of immanent critical standpoint *qua* “literature” on the directly categorical plane, however, and suspending here what is, in the long run, probably the more productive and fruitful strategy, itself more immanent in spirit, of pursuing this question through a close study and critique of Adornian immanent critique itself (with perhaps a series of

side glances at Lukács), I propose to come at this question, so to speak, from below by situating it in its pedagogical and its most immediate intellectual-phenomenological context. This, then, introduces the second problem or point of departure, which I will develop at some length in what follows, returning via this route to the more abstractly theoretical form of the question as initially formulated above.

Anyone who has been given the job of teaching “theory” in relation to literature — or of teaching literature “theoretically” — and who has tried to do this in a systematic, methodical way will sooner or later find himself in a familiar quandary: how to satisfy the expectation that the “theory” in question be “applied” to literature, the latter almost invariably as embodied in a particular work or “text.” Say — and here I draw on my own recent classroom experience in trying to teach critical theory to Comparative Literature undergraduates — the “theory” is psychoanalysis, specifically Freud’s essay on the uncanny, and the text is a staple specimen of “theory” handbooks, Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*. Especially if what passes in the instructional literature for the “theoretical” reading of such texts is operating as a model, the “application” of the former to the latter must, it seems, follow. But exactly how? After the selection of “theory” and text — and setting aside here for now the question of what, methodologically, justifies even so much as that copula — what is the next move in such a “theoretical” analysis or critique? If psychoanalysis is taken on its most general, categorical level as, say, the theory of the unconscious, what, then, makes the latter “applicable” to *Beloved*? Speculation as to Morrison’s unconscious? About the unconscious of the novel’s main characters? These are usually the first, common-sensical “applications” favored by students, even if the fallacies here are obvious to the more seasoned literary “theorist.” But, if this is not what is meant by “applying” theory in this case, then what is? A more practical and likely solution is perhaps to be found in narrowing down the scope of “application” and, say, searching *Beloved* for instances of the affect Freud describes as the uncanny, especially since Freud’s own interpretation of Hoffmann’s “The Sand-Man” can be recommended to students as a model. But then suppose that no clear instances of the uncanny are to be detected in *Beloved*. What then? Is the theory of the uncanny therefore the *wrong* theory — meaning that another must be found? Freud’s interest in the uncanny in “The Sand-Man” is not, finally, a literary but a therapeutic, or, more generally, psychological one, and Hoffmann’s text serves him as a richer source of the affect — and perhaps, thereby, a better vantage point onto the general phenomenon of repression and its neurotic symptoms — than is typically afforded by the “psychopathology of everyday life.” But if

what is sought in the “application” of theory to text is something on the order of a “critique,” then how, in turn, does the detection of this or that affect or symptomlike quality in *Beloved* further this end?

Here and there some genuine *interpretive* insight may result from such repeated, essentially random collisions of “text” and “theory.” Readers of *Beloved* armed with Freud’s essay may be struck, for example, by what doubtless *is* a relative absence of the uncanny in the novel, given that it is a story centered around the quintessential locus of uncanniness, the haunted house. Nowhere is it written, of course, that a ghost story must be frightening or uncanny, but the fact that *Beloved*, a novel that self-consciously thematizes the return of the repressed, internalized violence of slavery, prefers — in evident obedience to the standardized formulae of García Márquez’s style of “magical realism” — a stylized, domesticated, and quasi-ethnographical ghost to a haunting one may suggest to its would-be psychoanalyst that the genuine site of repression within the *novel’s* unconscious lies in its overtly *canny* treatment of intrinsically uncanny material. But even if this line of analysis is able to connect up otherwise disparate, problematic elements within the novel, it remains essentially descriptive. Nothing, here, whether “theoretical” or “textual,” *grounds* — that is, renders *necessary* — the movement from interpretation to critique. One can as plausibly argue that *Beloved’s* “un-uncanniness” (assuming even this interpretive result is compelling in the face of objections from readers who claim that they *are* haunted by *Beloved*) is evidence, say, of its capacity for the symbolic mastery — for *sublimating* — the repressed violence of slavery as that it is evidence of the novel’s neurotic displacement of the very repressed violence it gestures at bringing to consciousness. And both of *these* would-be critical-theoretical readings of *Beloved* presuppose as “critical” what amounts to the psychoanalytical, therapeutic value judgment according to which the unlocking of repressed impulses or experience counts as a desirable goal. It would be perverse, *qua* psychoanalysis, to dispute this, but nowhere is it written, either, that novels are analogues of psychotherapy.

And so on. In the same way that “text” and “theory,” however enlightening their subsequent, accidental linkage, appear to collide in an irrational space of pure immediacy and indeterminacy, so, too, do the cognitive and critical aims of theory per se appear, inevitably, to exist independently, if not in outright opposition to one another. And yet, one searches its canons and copious instructional literature in vain for any glimmerings of suspicion that something is amiss in the house of “theory.”

But anyone schooled in dialectical thinking ought to recognize in this intellectual pathology — what I will refer to in what follows as the “fallacy of application” — the symptoms of a reification. “Theory” and “text,”

“interpretation” and “critique,” are not merely each other’s accidents but are structured as *antinomies*. As soon as its object becomes a “text,” *any* theory “applied” to it — no matter whether it is psychoanalysis, structuralist narratology, or Marxism itself, and no matter its own immanent richness and conceptual mediation — is reduced to being a mere intellectual fetish, a species of abstract tautology. And the same goes, inversely, for “texts”: as “read” by a theory understood, *a priori*, as external to their own objective mediatedness, these become rigid ciphers, as meaningless, finally, in relation to interpretation as they are meaningful within their own immanent contexts.

In one form or another, including the currently preferred and equally pseudo-theoretical gambit that thinks to avoid it by substituting a “cultural” for a literary object, the “fallacy of application” pervades and, in a sense, defines the humanistic discipline of “theory,” whether literary, cultural, or otherwise. That fact may, of course, mean as good as nothing to the theoretical problem of immanent standpoint with which we began. The disciplinary entities known as “theory” and “literature” must never, at the cost of automatic critical self-trivialization, be confused with their genuine content as concepts for critical theory *extra muros*. Yet, if submitted to a second reflection along the very lines of its apparently antinomic structure — that is to say, to this extent, immanently — the “fallacy of application” can be made to point beyond itself. One may, for example, pose the question (and this is the strategy I follow with my own students) of why it is assumed that “theory” in this context must be “applied” in the first place? To what kinds of objects is theory, as more generally and conventionally understood *outside* the literary-critical context, “applied”? The answer — that theory in the case, say, of a theory of global warming is applied to data, to facts — then prompts the next question: is *Beloved* (or literature itself) an empirical datum the way, for example, rising ocean temperatures are? The answer to this may not be obvious, since the object conventionally designated as *Beloved* here does appear to have empirical properties, e.g., the precise combination of words on its pages, or the fact that Morrison wrote it, and wrote it at such and such a time and place, etc. But is it to these kinds of empirical properties of *Beloved* that we are seeking to “apply” Freud’s theory of the uncanny?

Here, the aid of Freud himself can again be invoked. To what kinds of objects — if we set aside here the literary kind in the case of “The Uncanny” — is psychoanalytical theory “applied”? The answer here is a multiple and complex one — encompassing the neurotic symptom, parapraxes, the unconscious itself — but included in it would, uncontroversially, be simply *affect*, since that is, at base, the psychological category to which the uncanny belongs. “The Sand-Man” is of interest to Freud here as an object for psychoanalysis only insofar as it produces an especially vivid sensation of

the uncanny in its readers — that is for the narrative's own affective properties. Is it not, after all, then, to the affective properties of *Beloved*, whatever these may be — or rather to the novel's *form* as an object that generates or elicits affects — that the psychoanalytical theory of the uncanny is properly “applied”?

This reasoning may seem overly elementary and naïve to the adepts of “theory,” but in fact it already furnishes us with the logical structure for exiting the reifying “fallacy of application” — a fallacy to which no form of nondialectical theory, however sophisticated, does not itself eventually succumb. For, although affects such as the uncanny may indeed be treated as empirical data — something that Freud himself as, on one level, their scientific observer obviously considers them to be — their *form* as objects when we “observe” them in “The Sand-Man” or *Beloved* is not that of, say, rising ocean temperatures. As readers of these “texts,” we cannot observe such “affective” objects without observing their presence (or, for that matter, their absence) in ourselves. Affects such as the uncanny, in other words, are not truly empirical objects at all, but objects in simultaneously subjective form, or — the Hegelian usage now becomes practically unavoidable — “subject/objects.” This becomes clearer, at least to my students, if we then consider the kind of pre- or quasi-literary narrative object for whose analysis Freud is most celebrated: dreams. Everyone ponders the meaning of their own dreams, i.e., to that extent, treats them as theoretical objects. But, in “applying,” say, the analytical methods expounded in *The Interpretation of Dreams* to one's own dreams, one “applies” these reflexively to oneself. Are “we” not our own dreams — and yet, at the same time, also *not* our own dreams, insofar as we objectify them and treat them independently of our subjective immediacy? Is not the subject who dreams — both as individual and as collective subject — continuous, however unconsciously, with the subject “applying” the theory, or rather, with theory itself as “subject”? As “subject/object,” the dream — and no less the literary representation or narrative that is “The Sand-Man” or *Beloved* — differs from an empirical datum such as rising ocean temperatures not only *qua* fact or object of theoretical “application” but *qua* its very *form* of objectivity. The crude, relativist fallacy (neo-Cartesian twin to the fallacy of application) must itself be militantly warded off at this point: the “subjective” dimension of, say, affective objects such as sensations of the uncanny, whether in dreams, neurotic symptoms, or literary narratives, does not make their theorization any less “objective.” To think so is to believe that the subject who theorizes is finally discontinuous with the subject who dreams, who feels, who reads, or, indeed, who writes. There is no theorizing subject external to the affective and representational forms that mediate — that indeed *are* — this subject as

well. To predialectical ears, the expression will still sound paradoxical or esoteric at this point in the pedagogical exposition, but its logic, like that of the “subject/object,” has become inevitable: theoretical objects in the form of “subject/objects” are themselves, as a result of their formation, no less the *subjects* of their own “theorization.” Their “theory” does not, in any absolute or final sense, come to them from outside their own being as objects — hence it is not “applied” to them at all according to the standard, empirical meaning of “theory.” The theorization of objects whose form of objectivity is common to affects, dreams, narrative, etc., is, from the standpoint of this form itself, at the same time, their *self*-theorization. Theory, then, is not “applied” but is *immanent* to such objects. Here, we have the first and most basic methodological principle of immanent critique in relation to “literary” objects, however counterintuitive and paradoxical this may still appear to conventional belletristic and “theoretical” literary criticism alike.

In this, it is true, immanent critique in its methodological relation to literature would not as yet be distinguishable from the method of immanent social critique exemplified in *Capital* and expounded by Postone — or, for that matter, from the immanent relationship of knowledge and its object as argued in Hegel's *Logic*. The abstract certainty that a “text” such as *Beloved* is an immediately subjectlike, nonempirical object, and thus already present in any theoretical consciousness of it as an object, still gives us no clear idea of what its critique would mean, nor of how to undertake it. Thus we are, it would appear, no closer to discovering what — if anything — constitutes the precise, determinate standpoint of immanent critique as “literary” critique. Nevertheless, the mere fact that — if the practical and, so to speak, negatively phenomenological derivation sketched out above is valid — the surface of an object such as *Beloved* offers up nothing immediate to connect it to “theory” in its nondialectical, Cartesian-empirical form, already tells us more than this. For the *literary* object, in contrast to the more general and abstractly social object of theory, suggests, if anything, an almost irrational imperviousness to positive, empirical “science.” The abstractly social here appears more vulnerable to reification than does the literary object — whence the fact that the “sociology of literature,” though real enough in a trivial, disciplinary sense, comes no closer to being “applicable” as theory to the literary object itself than would, say, a mere word count. The literary object as “subject/object” merges, in the end, with the social as a fully *dialectical* category, but the distance separating it from a dialectical, immanently critical method appears, if only negatively and “irrationally,” to be both shorter and yet more occult and abyssal. The reification of “literature,” unlike that of society, leads directly and spontaneously into a no-man's land of theoretical and methodological self-parody and paralysis. As in the

above “pedagogical” derivation, theory, in effect, stumbles onto its own immanent relation to the literary object because all other modes of access have been denied it.

But, to take this thought any further, we must first specify more precisely and conceptually the formal or categorical reality of the “literary” object in its relation to critical theory. We have termed the form of objectivity to which “literature,” along with affect, dream, narrative, etc., belongs — at least as an immanent context of psychoanalysis — as that of a “subject/object.” But this distinction, too — though only by its means does “literature” enter into the general domain of dialectical thought — fails to isolate the concrete category through which the “literary” form of “subject/object” mediates and is mediated by its relation to the social totality.

What is this category? A return to our pedagogical thought experiment may again help to pick up its thread. The misguided attempt to “apply” psychoanalytical theory to *Beloved* had forced us into a “theoretical” antinomy from which it became possible to conclude, *via negationis* and with the aid of a lesson in interpretation provided by Freud in “The Uncanny,” that the literary object itself must possess “subject”-like qualities — qualities whereby it resembled the more conventional objects of psychoanalysis. But this resemblance itself, the obvious affinity of the literary object for dreams and various other sorts of psychic objects analyzed by Freud, clearly discloses more than the subjective mediation of such objects. For what determines this, so to speak, pretheoretical intuition of resemblance rests not only on what is sensed as the *a priori* presence of the subject in the object but on a specific and concrete *form* of their mediation. In the “literary” and, more generally, psychoanalyzable object alike, a subject mediates itself through an object *consciously*, and this objective medium must in turn possess the qualities that make this conscious mediation possible.⁸

The question, then, absent the “fallacy of application” — i.e., once the pseudo-empirical form of the literary object has been discarded by critical theory as itself either nonessential or a reification — becomes that of this objective medium itself. This can only be what is common to “literary” objects such as *Beloved* and “The Sand-Man” and other affective “subject/objects” such as dreams, symptoms, parapraxes, etc.: not “affect” per se, since it can take a purely unmediated, subjective form, but that which conveys or reproduces it here, namely, narrative, the symbolic, representation, etc. In a word: mimesis.

“Mimesis” for many of us will, of course, evoke the now-effectively defunct tradition of Aristotelianism and the scarcely less hoary figures of an Auerbach or a Frye — the avatars of an aesthetics of imitation long since

thought to be obsolete in the wake of modernism, the avant-garde, and, finally, of contemporary “theory” itself, especially in its “linguistic turn.” In fact, mimesis as a theoretical category plays centrally, if in widely divergent ways, in the dialectical aesthetics of both Lukács and Adorno. But setting aside once more here any foray into the latter terrain, and reasoning simply in accordance with the dialectical axiom that categorizes the “literary” object as a form of “subject/object,” mimesis can be speculatively identified here as that category already inferred from the preceding pedagogical derivation: the process whereby a subject mediates itself through an object, but here as a process taking place in and for consciousness (or the unconscious). All that is missing from this dialectical category here — for reasons shortly to become apparent — is the postulate of its essential determination as a directly *social*, as well as conscious, mediated unity of subject and object. Mimesis here names, in other words, the dialectical relation of subject and object as a *conscious*, directly social relation.

An object such as a dream, a verbal narrative, or a visual representation would not, in this sense, be termed “mimetic” simply because a subject makes use of it to “imitate” an object external to itself — the undialectical, common-sense notion of mimesis inherited from the classical tradition and reproduced in critics such as Auerbach. Such objects are termed “mimetic” here because they are the media through which a subject — *itself* immediately social even when “private” and thus already present in its own object — continuously reobjectifies itself, and in which such a subject potentially *recognizes* itself.

From this standpoint, the classical theory of mimesis, especially as outlined in the *Poetics*, can, though formally nondialectical, become uniquely illuminating for dialectical theory and method. Consider, for example, Aristotle’s stipulation, in the second chapter of the *Poetics*, that tragedy take as its essential object of imitation human action, or “praxis.” The *Poetics* already conceives of this, in ways that can appear to anticipate the modern, reified Cartesian subject-object duality, as an external, instrumental relation of imitating subject (the tragic poet) and an imitated object (the action selected for tragic portrayal). However, the separation of mimetic subject and object — a separation already in effect in Plato’s *Republic*, but which Plato still seeks to reverse through state regulation and policing — remains a relative one. The subject whose action is imitated and the subject imitating it, while appearing for Aristotle to be distinct entities, are nevertheless reducible to the same substance: essentially, the subject that is society itself, or *polis*. “Praxis,” that is, at the level of the social “subject/object” comprising poet, tragic action, and audience, imitates *itself* — a dialectic whose political dangers for the Platonic state, have, for Aristotelian liberalism, been reduced

to matters of judgment and good taste. The tragic poem, while asserting its own relative autonomy as a mimetic instrument, cannot, nevertheless, be conceived of outside its *social* immanence — hence its susceptibility to prescription and a kind of theoretical etiquette. It remains, *ultima instantia*, the imitation of an object, outside of whose immanent and essentially local, concrete context, *imitation itself* would lose all meaning or purpose — an object, in other words, that, on the level of the social totality, remains, likewise, *subject*. *Poetics*, like the Platonic theory that it criticized and rationalized, pushes virtually to the conceptual threshold of a Cartesian-like reification, of a purely abstract, instrumentalized theory of representation. But it cannot cross this threshold, and, thus, the mimetic nexus remains, for it, both an instrumental *and* a social one.

But, although the classical theory of mimesis stops just short of falling under its spell, it foreshadows a “praxis” that is “human” (i.e., social) but that is unable to recognize itself as social, to become, as praxis, a conscious “subject.” This is none other than the “social” action of commodities theorized by Marx in *Capital* I, chapter I, in the section on commodity fetishism.⁹ As, in Postone’s useful phrase, a “form of social mediation,” the “phantom objectivity” of the commodity, or simply of “value,” converts the action of society as a whole into something purely thing-like and spontaneously unavailable to consciousness. I take Marx’s theory of commodity fetishism — *fons et origo* of modern critical theory — to be in no need of further explanation here. Suffice it at this point to observe that the reified object *qua* form of objectivity counts as a “subject/object” as well, but one mediating itself “behind the back” of the subject-form to which it corresponds. *As mediated forms of “subject/object,” that is, value and mimesis are opposite, indeed, antithetical to one another.* The reified society of capitalist modernity fails, as subject, to become aware of itself in the value abstraction, an object that, so to speak, “recognizes” itself only in other such objects. Value, as embodied in the commodity form of the object, thus represents the nonmimetic object par excellence.

With this still, no doubt, highly abstract and speculative thesis — the dialectical contradiction between value and mimesis as socially mediating forms of “subject/object” — I arrive at the fulcrum of the present argument. To take even an abbreviated account of what are, if it holds true, its full implications would far exceed the limits of what I can accomplish here. My method for deriving it, via a pedagogical *in medias res* and an oblique, probably amateurish reflection on the classical theory of mimesis, leaps over what are clearly a whole range of needed theoretical arguments and

clarifications. Not the least of these concerns the concept of mimesis as a *socially* mediating category, something I have postulated here without any adequate context. I am convinced that the deeper, constitutive dimension of mimesis as a social form — a dimension without which its superficial aesthetic, ethnographic, and psychological aspects remain trapped within a descriptive, uncritical, and theoretically impoverished perspective — can be rigorously derived from the mature critical theory of Marx, and the latter’s further elaboration in work such as Postone’s.¹⁰ Yet this derivation is scarcely hinted at in Marx, and, with the partial exception of Adorno, who circles around the question of mimesis and reification without, in my reading of him, clarifying it theoretically, represents an effectively blank spot on the map of critical theory. The one partial exception here may be Benjamin, who seems to have at least glimpsed the contours of this dialectic in “The Storyteller.” What Benjamin alleges there, from the standpoint of a kind of materialist ethnography, as the progressive loss of the spontaneous social capacity to tell stories in the course of capitalist modernization, and which he attributes to a puzzling and theoretically underspecified eclipse of “experience,” nevertheless points, I think, at the fundamental theoretical distinction here: those societies in which the value-form is either absent or lacks any socially mediating function (which would comprise a possible postcapitalist social form) mediate and reproduce themselves *directly* on a plane of conscious, social self-representation and recognition, however indirect and mystified the forms taken by the latter may be. To use the more familiar terms, pre- or noncommodity society not only narrates itself as part of its ideological self-legitimation — something, after all, true of commodity society as well, *qua* ideology. Such forms of society cannot reproduce themselves *except* insofar as they continuously assume “narrative” form in the consciousness of the individuals composing them.¹¹ Commodity society obeys no such reproductive law. (This accords with what is also, *qua* the more fully totalized social form of capitalist modernity, the relatively less self-integrated, ad hoc, spatiotemporal heterogeneity of noncommodity society.) That is, of necessity, nonreified society, along with its corresponding forms of social subjectivity, mediates itself *mimetically*. Value-mediated society does not eradicate such forms of mimetic self-reproduction (“narrative,” story telling, etc.), though it arguably tends asymptotically toward this goal. But it does banish them into marginal, socially nonreproductive spheres. This, rather than Benjamin’s intuitively certain but undertheorized eclipse of “experience” and rise of “information,” is what would account, then, for the decline in the social ability to tell stories. One knows spontaneously how to tell them — in fact, one does not know oneself socially *except* through telling them — because one’s very social being has,

without them, no other viable form.

But, although such a dialectical typology of social form *qua* mimesis must at this point remain a theoretical postulate, with it the question with which we began, that of the standpoint of immanent critique as “literary” critique, can now be answered: such a standpoint is the contradiction between value and mimesis, or between reified and mimetic forms of objectivity. The progressive tendency of value — of, to use Marx’s term, “asocial societalization” — toward the negation of mimesis as a form of social mediation and reproduction not only condemns the mimetic object — Benjamin’s “experience” and story telling — to an increasingly marginalized existence. It also, by that same logic, confers on such objects a negative social charge. Mimesis is not merely the transparent medium within which a class-bound ideological struggle is waged. Nor is it, as it was for Lukács, confined to the level of a species-being upon whose ground there was then to be erected a realist aesthetic able to “glimpse socialism” — although there may, in fact, still be much to be learned about this category from a critical study of Lukács’s aesthetic theory. Mimesis is *itself* inseparably bound up with a form of societalization of which the value-abstraction is the direct, determinate negation. But insofar as value, in its fully historical and dynamic form as capital, pushes, in accordance with that dynamic, toward a terminal social crisis pitting capital against its own social conditions of possibility, the mimetic object not only preserves, negatively, the outlines of a nonreified form of consciousness. It becomes a standpoint — though certainly not the only one — from which to glimpse, on the hither side of value, the possible shape of things to come.

The fact, meanwhile, that the “literary” object in its essential form as mimetic object finally eludes positive, empirical theorization, presenting to the reifying categories of the latter either what appears to be an irrational imperviousness to theoretical cognition (Benjamin’s term for this imperviousness is “aura”) or, at best, leading it into the antinomies of the “fallacy of application,” sheds its irrational appearance once the dialectical contradiction that grounds this theoretical antinomy — the social and historical antithesis of value and mimesis — is itself clearly theorized and brought to bear via a second reflection. What has now become, with the decline of “story telling,” the irreducible negativity of mimesis as a social form of objectivity constitutes the necessary blind spot of conventional, reifying theoretical consciousness *because* such a form of objectivity corresponds directly, albeit negatively and *in potentia*, to a form of nonreified consciousness, to a mimetic form of *subjectivity* outside and opposite to the “theory’s” social purview. That is, the object that, in its initial pseudo-empirical form of appearance as “literary” object, eludes positive theorization corresponds on

the level of its underlying categorical reality as mimetic object to the social and historical standpoint from which “theory’s” reifying categories and self-understanding are *themselves* to be critically understood and overcome. Critique is immanent to the “literary” object insofar as and to the extent that such an object, realizing its own essence by conforming to its own negatively mimetic form of objectivity, asserts its incompatibility with *all* reifying forms of consciousness and “theory.” The critical theory of the “literary” object is the *self*-awareness of the mimetic form of objectivity — of the directly, *consciously* social form of “subject/object” — in its negativity.

This leaves entirely unexplored and unresolved, to be sure, the question of the precise, determinate relation between mimesis as what grounds, negatively, the possibility of the “literary” object and the given content — the singularity — of the “literary” object in the form of an individual “text” or *work*. The fact that the critical standpoint from which to undertake its critique resides immanently within the individual work itself insofar as *it* remains, formally, a mimetic object — the fact that a work such as *Beloved* does, to this extent, furnish the standpoint of its own critique — does not of course absolve any work in its turn from the most unsparing criticism. The social negativity of mimetic form cannot, under any circumstances, be ascribed *directly* to individual works themselves. The “work” is not the anticommodity. As mimetic object, its task is to frame and instantiate the negative flux of nonreified consciousness — or what *would be* such a consciousness — and nothing more. It may fail at this task — for this potential for failure, too, is what makes it a “work.” To lose sight of this (in its own right) fundamental principle of immanent critique and postulate a directly aesthetic negativity, attributing either to works themselves, or to art or literature as general categories, a radical agency, is to risk falling back into the frozen antinomies of “theory”: there is a fallacy of “agency” to match every fallacy of “application.” A poem or a novel no more *acts* than a dream or a fantasy does — that is to say, they act only insofar as no *conscious* social action is possible *except* as mediated by such mimetic objects.

It is to this relation of mimetic form to individual work and to the path (the method) leading immanent critique from one to the other — and back again — that I hope to turn in more detail in further elaborations of “Principles of Immanent Critique.” Absent an absolute theoretical and methodological clarity as to the *standpoint* of such a critique, however, this path leads, at best, into fortuitous insights from which it then becomes impossible to trace one’s way back. And, at worst, and most often, it can lead nowhere but back into the reified, critical paralysis of what typically counts as literary and cultural “theory” today.

Notes

¹ Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx's Critical Theory* (Cambridge: U Cambridge P, 1996) 87-88.

² Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination* 140-41.

³ I leave aside, here, for purposes of argument, the question of the exact relationship of "literature," as form and category, to "culture," and treat them as isomorphic.

⁴ Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination* 21.

⁵ See, for example, "Cultural Criticism and Society," in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel Weber and Shierry Weber (Cambridge: MIT P, 1983) 17-34; "The Essay as Form" in *Notes to Literature*, vol. 1, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York, Columbia UP, 1991) 3-23; and Adorno's contributions to *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, trans. Glyn Adey and David Frisby (New York: Harper and Row, 1976) 1-86; 105-122.

⁶ "The Idiom of Crisis: On the Historical Immanence of Language in Adorno," forthcoming.

⁷ See Postone, *Time, Labor and Social Domination*, chapter 3, 84-120.

⁸ I understand the Freudian category of the "unconscious" as continuous here with the conscious. The "unconsciousness" of the social relations expressed in the commodity fetish lacks — as we shall see herein — this property of continuity.

⁹ "The mysterious character of the commodity-form consists therefore simply in the fact that the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men's own labour as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things. Hence it also reflects the social relation of the producers to the sum total of labour as a social relation between objects, a relation which exists apart from and outside the producers." *Capital*, Vol. I, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1990) 164-65.

¹⁰ I would include here as well the crucial contributions to contemporary critical theory being made by the movement known in German-speaking circles as "Wertkritik." *Vide* work by Robert Kurz, Roswitha Scholz, Ernst Lohoff, Norbert Trenkl, and others associated with the journals *Krisis* and *Exit!*

¹¹ This is a theory I have already touched on in a preliminary way in the final chapter of my own work, *Determinations* (London: Verso, 2001).