

One, Two, Many Ends of Literature

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What does it mean to talk about the end of literature? Literature is built around an impossibility, an impasse internal to it. But this means that the end of literature is, in fact, a condition of its possibility. If the representational problem at the heart of the literary were solved (rather than abandoned in its literary form, which is always a possibility), we would no longer be talking about literature; we would be gods or, no less fantastically, we would be in possession of Borges's Aleph. The contradictions internal to literature (as with those internal to capitalism) are immanently its end in that their resolution would entail its supersession, but they are also the precondition for its functioning. The end is, in that sense, the a priori; in other words, to indulge in a paradox, the end is in fact the beginning: which is to say that literature's conditions of possibility and its conditions of impossibility are one and the same.

To speak a little more clearly, I would say that the institution of literature, only a little more than two centuries old, is structured around a central dynamic, namely a dialectic that plays out between an impulse toward the sublime (an anti-representational practice that, because it forswears representation, remains true to its object at the cost of losing it as object) and an impulse toward allegory (a representational practice which, because it is representational, in taking hold of its object deforms it absolutely). Borges, in "El Aleph," was fully aware of this dilemma; possession of the Aleph does not make its owner a better poet. It seems to me, though I don't have time to more than gesture toward it here, that this dynamic can be played back from the beginning, like an algorithm, in a number of different contexts and situations, and that in each case it will have a definite endpoint, an impasse internal to it which finally cannot be superseded.

Needless to say, a logical end to literature is quite different from an historical end to literature; needless to say, even an historical end to the institution of literature in the esoteric sense I am using it today wouldn't mean the end of literature in the exoteric sense. But what I would like to emphasize before getting underway is that the claim of the historical end of literature should not be seen as a radical or exorbitant or attention-seeking one; like all art forms, what we call literature had a beginning, to which I will return shortly, and it will have an end.

With that out of the way, I want to say something very simple, probably too simple, about literary criticism and Marxism, and that is that the forms of attention required by literary analysis are particularly congenial to Marxism. Why would this be? It would not be outrageous to claim that literature in the modern sense and the dialectic were born in the same place, at the same time (Jena, at the turn of the nineteenth century, in the circle around the Schlegels and their journals and, in the case of Hegel still feeling his way through the Jena "system-drafts," decidedly at its margins). So a genealogical case might be made (but it would be far beyond my competence to make it) that in the twentieth century these sibling rivals discovered themselves to be long-lost brothers. But the case I'd like to sketch today is different, though not incompatible with this, namely that both are what I will call formal materialisms. Marxism is also a materialism in a different sense with which we are all familiar, even if its exact meaning is far from straightforward, and which I'm tempted to call a real materialism or a materialism of content. Let me return to the question of the origins of literature to explain what I want to convey by the idea of a formal materialism.

I'll take it as uncontroversial that while objects worthy of and appropriate to literary analysis have appeared at many places and times, the discourse that construes certain objects as literary and opens them up to a certain mode of analysis (what I referred to a moment ago as the institution of literature) has a definite, and even relatively recent origin. I'll leave aside questions about the historical determinants of such an emergence. (Though I might telegraph for those who are interested that Lukács's brief comments on Schiller in the reification essay provide a model from which one would not have to stray far.) I will turn rather to Schlegel's *Athenaeum* fragments, written over the turn of the nineteenth century. I've written about this elsewhere (and draw heavily on others for my understanding of this moment) and I don't want to belabor it, but we remember that for Schlegel the emergence of literature is already bound up with the fate of philosophy, and, in particular, to its historical and logical end: "Where philosophy stops, poetry has to begin."¹

But the interesting thing about this emergent discourse on literature is its

relationship to another thing, no longer philosophy but something much more like what we think of as theory. First: "poetry should describe itself, and always be simultaneously poetry and the poetry of poetry."² In other words, poetry (understood in the broadest sense) must also always be a theory of poetry. Conversely, however, critique must always be "poetical through and through and at the same time a living, vibrant work of art."³ Although at first glance the emphasis is on poetry, something very interesting is happening here. A reflexive moment is required of poetry itself, while the discourse on poetry is required to be poetic. Very well. But what we note, then, is that the literary object is incomplete without this reflective supplement. Thus, literary theory is invented at the same moment as literature itself.

But, also, theory is incomplete without literature. This seems tautological: of course literary theory would be incomplete without its object. But we can say of a discourse like, say, physics (or philosophy in the old systematic sense) that the ideal, the horizon of totalization, is a theory that completes itself such that the object is no longer, from the point of view of the discourse on it, necessary. Here, however, theory (and this is precisely the point of thinking it in fragments) is always incomplete, always receptive to something: the text. Adorno says somewhere that there can be no "gapless" theory of literature, and this is the thought that I am trying to get at. Any literary theory must be completed, every time, and revised in the light of, every time, a thing that it waits for. This is what I mean by a formal materialism.

This structure is obviously not something nobody has noticed before. I take Neil's citation a moment ago from Moishe Postone to be saying much the same thing about *Capital*, and indeed I imagine, though it would take a lot more thinking to ascertain it, that what I am saying here could be very neatly integrated with Neil's elaboration of the problem of immanence, though it might be useful to think his subject-object backwards: it is not only that what is "out there" in the text is also "in here" in the subject, but also that what is "in here" in my experience of the object is also "out there" in the text. Or, at any rate, it must be "out there" in the text if it is to count. If I'm understanding things right, this is precisely what it would mean for the literary text to be necessarily its own theory. I take this also to be a version of Hegel's intervention into philosophy, although there are a lot of different ways to construe this, my favorite of which is that Hegel is the first philosopher to introduce time as a solution rather than as a problem. But perhaps that is a reduction of what I am about to say. Now, clearly, a certain Hegel, the Hegel of the *Logics*, is a philosopher of system, and I am far from wanting to dismiss that Hegel. But the Hegel of the *Phenomenology* is something different: in the Introduction, Hegel lays out an absolutely

minimal framework, and then ... waits for an object.

The framework itself works something like this. You know something, but you know you know it in error. Very well. We can think of that knowledge as phenomenal, and what remains inaccessible to it as noumenal. We can be sure of not making any mistakes in that way, since we will always understand that what we know is known through our categories and our instruments, and is not the thing itself. But wait, says Hegel. The noumenon is the solution to a philosophical problem. Thus it is, by definition and absolutely, accessible to thought; it is, that is, nothing other than a product of thought. What we have, then, is two modes of appearance of the same object. One is the object that I know, and that I know that I know in error. The other is the object that I know that I don't know. But suddenly now not only is the object internally split between the object I know and the object I know I don't know, but so is the subject, because there are two I's here, one that corresponds to the subject that knows the object, and another that corresponds to the subject that knows that that object is known in error, and is already looking towards another object, or towards the other, unknown aspect of the same object. Thus, there is in Hegel not a subject/object split but a split that runs through both subject and object. Thus, most importantly, temporality, this internal unrest we call History, is introduced into the heart of the subject and the object alike, not as another problem to be worked out once the thing has been understood, but as something that has to be thought alongside, or rather integrally to, any other thought.

Now, the point is that this is absolutely minimal, and it doesn't take much longer for Hegel to say it than I did just now. And then it's a matter of waiting for an object. (The first object this framework encounters is sense-certainty, which one would expect to function as a foundational moment, but is instead ruthlessly shown to be self-contradictory.) Now, it's not that a tremendous amount of rhetorical and narrative work doesn't go into arranging these contents and systematizing them after a fashion. The point is rather that, given the motor of the dialectic in the preface, you never know in any case how it is going to work, and despite various family resemblances, not to mention stereotypes (of which thesis-antithesis-synthesis is only the most notorious), it almost never works the same way twice. There is, then, a Hegelian dialectic, in that Hegel has a minimal account of what's at work in all the individual moments of the text. But once things get going, all there are are dialectics, plural dialectics. Each object requires its own theory, in fact, immanently contains its own theory (Neil's subject-object again). You don't get out of Feudalism the same way you get out of the Greek polis; you don't get out of sense certainty the same way you get out of the Hebrew sublime.

Now we all know that Marxism is a materialism, even if we probably

don't all agree on what that means in any strict theoretical accounting. But I think, I hope, we can agree that anything that finds it important to call itself Marxism will return stubbornly to the question of mode of production, which might sound more congenial to ears outside this room by paraphrasing it, without any violence, as the mode of the production and reproduction of human life, and which, however you slice it and whatever you call it, has been capitalism for quite some time and on a worldwide scale. But Marxism is also a formal materialism, in that it is not, and cannot become, a system; it is, instead, a network of interpretive machines (some of which have for good or for ill fallen into desuetude and disrepair), built on a common axiomatics. A couple of years ago this group seemed receptive to the idea, which I haven't worked out any more thoroughly since, that this axiomatics is essentially twofold: the suture of thought to history (Hegel) and the suture of history to the production and reproduction of human life (Marx). On this view, such key ideas as the labor theory of value or the centrality of the industrial proletariat might be more or less basic, more or less common to all the machines in the network, but they are already products of these two axioms which have been put to work on historical and social material, and not axioms themselves. Now, again, needless to say, there have been self-described Marxisms that have done without one or another of these, and I wouldn't want to say they were deluded and not Marxisms at all. Or perhaps, on the contrary, more than two axioms are required. Perhaps, indeed, there is also a larger network of Marxisms. But I think it might not be too quick to say that all Marxisms share this, that they begin from a few basic axioms and then wait for material to work on. *Capital*, of course, as we just heard Postone remind us. But think of the *Eighteenth Brumaire*. Or of Roberto Schwarz on the Brazilian 1960s. Benjamin on technology and fascism. Jameson on postmodernism. Fanon on the postcolony. It is always this moment, this crisis, this problem that has to be understood, and not the system as a whole that has to be elaborated. In this, the early Hegel, literary theory, and Marxism are not exactly anti-philosophies since, despite innumerable skirmishes, the latter two are not interested enough in philosophy as a discipline to seek to destroy it, and the first of course sought to become it. (In this, on second thought, Hegel perhaps initiates an anti-philosophy after all, since what an anti-philosophy really demands is to become what it opposes.) Rather, all three require a mode of thought, a mode of attention to the texture of the material, which is, I think, already familiar to us all, if not always thought about in precisely this way.

What this might concretely mean for literary theory is even less straightforward than it is for Marxism. Can the various "schools" be boiled down to sets of axioms? It might be a useful experiment to try: some of these

would be obviously illegitimate if stated clearly (whatever pockets of “reflection theory” still remain) and some would be merely implausible (the various arguments to readerly sympathy as an ethical value). Meanwhile, the “axiom” of immanence, central to Marxist critique as many of us practice it, is, insofar as it is an axiom, a violation of itself since it is not immanent to any text; or to the extent that it is immanent, it is not an axiom. In fact, the imperative to immanence is (as Neil has shown today, and as I have tried to find in Schlegel et al.) immanent to the text, and is therefore not an axiom; but its legibility depends (as Neil has also shown, and which I think is implicit in Schlegel et al.) on its axiomatic positing outside the text. The status of the historical axiom (the materialist axiom essentially specifying what we mean by history) is similarly complex. History is, of course, immanent to the text, any text. And yet it is precisely in entering history that the text’s own meanings begin to escape intention. The meaning of a text hinges, in effect, on its relationship to the present, which both is and isn’t given by the text. It is, in the sense that its own historical intervention is fixed; it isn’t, in the sense that the present is not fixed. Thus, the historical meaning of the text is both immanent and, apparently paradoxically, mutable.

My point today is not to try to draw out a set of axioms that would establish a theoretical starting-place for Marxist literary interpretation; rather, my point is that thinking of Marxism as an axiomatic machine might go some way to explaining why it sits so easily with the practice of literary interpretation. We can think of this as a problem: Marxist literary criticism is “just” literary criticism, after all. But like so much else that appeared for the first time at the end of the eighteenth century, the conceptual institution of literature is not so easy to supersede, even if we don’t call it literature and even if it doesn’t look like literature anymore but rather like film, television, pop, photography, or whatever. It is not at all obvious that Marxism should be expected to revolutionize literary criticism while social life is as dominated by capital as it ever was; it might be more reasonable to expect it to be no more than a mode of literary criticism, but no less than a mode of literary criticism oriented towards the end of the domination of social life by capital.

I would like to say one thing more about the end of literature. Mathias has done something very important in bringing to our attention the significance for literary study of a fundamental insight of the regulation school, which is simply that the real subsumption of labor under capital can never actually take place. That is, capitalism depends on a non-economic environment, a set of institutions and norms that, were they to become directly economic, would inhibit the reproduction of capital. Foucault’s lectures on neoliberalism confirm that this insight was central to early

neoliberal thought as well: the *ORDO* group understood that the free market was a delicate flower that could only flourish under specific conditions, and that these conditions could not be guaranteed by the market and would, in fact, be destroyed by exposure to the market. To be sure, when Marx drew the distinction between the formal and the real subsumption of labor under capital, he was not talking about a global subsumption, but rather about the way capitalism colonizes particular industries; and in this sense, of course, real subsumption is a recurrent feature of capitalist development. There is no reason that cultural labor cannot be so subsumed, and of course Adorno’s designation of the “culture industry” names just such a subsumption. The problem is that if such a subsumption were actually to occur (and to the extent that it has actually occurred, as in Adorno), culture would no longer be culture; that is, it could no longer be, in Mathias’s terms, the mediation between the mode of regulation and the regime of accumulation for the simple reason that it would be completely assimilated to the regime of accumulation. It would be design, or pornography, or advertising: a mood-altering commodity and nothing more, and there would be no particular reason to study it, or at least no reason to focus more attention or, more to the point, to focus different attention on it than we do on design, pornography, or advertising.

Now, the “something more or different” beyond the commodity has been a part of the ideology of the aesthetic from the “beginning,” by which I mean the relatively recent beginning I am assuming today. It has always been a tricky matter to explain why the commodification of art is a problem if art was a commodity before that was a problem. Adorno cites, I believe on more than one occasion, an anecdote about Beethoven, who hurls aside in disgust a book by Walter Scott, muttering “this fool writes for money!” or words to that effect. Adorno then reminds us that at that very moment Beethoven was busy looking for buyers for his late quartets. Needless to say, Adorno was not saying that Beethoven was a hypocrite. Scott, trying to write his way out of debt, was writing directly for the market; Beethoven was in effect, if I understand correctly the political economy of chamber music at that time, looking for a kind of *ex post facto* patronage.

Art can then only be more than a commodity when there are two markets: in Bourdieusian terms, a “restricted” market of cognoscenti and artists, supported by money but essentially a prestige economy more than a market in the strict sense, and the “general” market proper. The restricted field is by no means aloof from the dynamics of capitalism; on the long view, the general field subsidizes the restricted field, and from the perspective of the former, the latter is little more than a loss leader. But the restricted field is then only formally subsumed under capital, while the general field is really

so subsumed. Jameson's thesis about postmodernism is essentially that postmodernism marks the point where the formerly restricted field is really subsumed under capital, and the key insight of that essay is that this has profound repercussions for literary form. Essentially "style" can only have meaning within the restricted field, when a single game is being played, and each "style" is a solution to a formal problem tacitly agreed upon by all players. But as time goes on, and each solution is shown by the next to be nothing more than an instance of the problem — each beginning being implicitly an end — the game becomes increasingly difficult to play. The austerity of late-modernist style (in music, narrative, drama, poetry, sculpture, easel painting, and no doubt others I have forgotten to mention) is as much a matter of the paucity of remaining moves at the endgame as it is a social symptom. Under these circumstances, one can see how, in all the arts, the possibility of renouncing the restricted field is an extraordinarily enticing possibility. If the game is renounced, all of the old "styles" and strategies will become available again for use, precisely because their status as superseded moves will become irrelevant.

Of course, as postmodern practice realized early on, the renunciation of the restricted field immediately entails the subsumption into the general field and therefore the renunciation of much else besides, not least the "critical distance" cited by Jameson. If this renunciation is in earnest, the 200-year-old imperative at the heart of the concept of literature (but which also, I think I can say without substantiating it today, is operative in the other arts as well) is abandoned. Literature in the esoteric sense is at an end.

But if autonomy was no more than modernism's spontaneous ideology, there is no reason to be any less suspicious of the apparent ground of postmodernism; why should we believe that heteronomy is any more than postmodernism's spontaneous ideology? As an ideology, it accounts for something real, namely the real intensification of capital penetration into heretofore "cultural" zones of experience. (Which, by the way, is not necessarily a matter of capitalism's triumphant march, but equally possibly a function of the desperate search for profits once industrial modernization has exhausted itself. Only time will tell.) But its reference to the real does not make it any less a wish fulfillment or fantasy that makes sustainable a certain kind of attitude toward the world and activity within it. The belief in artistic heteronomy, in the real subsumption of artistic labor under capital, makes postmodern eclecticism possible; but the interest and dynamism of that practice does not make the belief true.

Adorno called our attention to "the ruse of the work," by analogy with Hegel's ruse of reason. It is not so easy to go against the tide of history; it is not so easy to renounce the game of literature. That is, the renunciation of the

game can become — and for Adorno, must become — a move in the game. (I believe Adorno was asserting just this about Brecht.) Think about postmodern eclecticism for a moment. In theory, it is radically heteronomous, renouncing all claim to transcendence with regard to the social field. But in this, it is no different than any arbitrarily delimited chunk of daily life, which is already a mishmash of incompatible styles, as a walk down the block or fifteen minutes on the Internet will confirm. The postmodern work of art is, however, not (or at least not only) a walk down the block or fifteen minutes on the Internet; it is a simulated heteronomous space, and therefore involves a principle of selection. Postmodern pastiche already contains, in its very principle, a moment of transcendence or autonomy with regard to the social field.⁴

Which is to say, of course, that it has a readable form; the principle of selection becomes the legible element in postmodern eclecticism. The meaning of form itself, even in its most abstract outline, is, however, radically different than it was for modernism. Modernism's insistence on autonomy did, in retrospect, legitimate a "critical distance" that made possible all sorts of political positions (Left, Right, and peculiar) within modernism. The insistence on form today is, as it was then, the insistence on a moment of autonomy. But now, heteronomy is the ideology not only of postmodernism (now surely at an end, as Mathias insists), but also of the victorious Right, in the insistence that there is nothing outside the market; that, in essence, human nature is the Market. In the new dispensation, any commitment to form is a commitment to the regulative role of culture, and is, I am tempted to say everywhere and always, on our side.

Notes

¹ *Ideas* 48 in Friedrich Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Peter Firchow (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1991). For a discussion of the emergence of the institution of literature and the place of Schlegel's *Athenaeum* fragments see Nicholas Brown, *Utopian Generations: The Political Horizon of Twentieth-Century Literature* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2007), especially 12-25, available in full text at <http://press.princeton.edu/chapters/s8067.pdf>.

² *Athenaeum* fragment 238 in Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*.

³ *Athenaeum* fragment 67 in Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*.

⁴ In music, think of Beck as an example of postmodern eclecticism in which the principle of selection is not apparent or is apparently mere whimsy. The appropriative excitement of the initially flat irony quickly gives way to an attitude of superiority towards all styles, which is nothing more than an expression of the desire for transcendence without the will to attempt it. With The White Stripes, it is immediately clear that behind the apparently similar eclecticism is a project, even if the principle of selection only becomes clear gradually. The repeated return to various iterations of blues form gives the clue to this project, which turns out to be a sort of partisan genealogy of rock music. As with the great Brazilian songwriter Caetano Veloso, who operates in a similar mode but works a different seam, there is no irony here in the appropriation of styles. It's true that it doesn't matter if a given form is considered degraded or canonical, but both are treated with equal seriousness. As with most such deliberately assumed games, the only rules are negative ones: no historical dead ends, and no songwriting. (If it is not immediately obvious why rock and songwriting define contrary poles, listen to the first two minutes or so of John Mellencamp's "I Need a Lover," which Mellencamp himself would be the first to admit reach a rare height of absurdity. It is worth noting that jazz recognizes no such polarization between the blues and songwriting; if this is not immediately obvious, listen to Oliver Nelson's *The Blues and the Abstract Truth*, which leans equally on blues form and Gershwin's "I Got Rhythm.") Now it is a matter of stripping a set of styles down to their sinews for analysis, a kind of musical comparative anatomy. In retrospect, Beck's forays into blues form seem to indicate a similar impulse, which, however, he did not carry through.

Postscript: Meanwhile, Adorno remains ahead of those of us who would try to "read" the products of the culture industry proper. A film like *Avatar* is no more "about" peak oil or Iraq than it is about space travel or the Mohicans; topical references are as desultory as the promiscuous citations from the history of science fiction film. The only thing a film like *Avatar* is "about," besides the box office, is the stimulus provided by the images themselves, which is, of course, prodigious.