

## *We Have Never Been Critical: Toward the Novel as Critique*

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The president of the Modern Language Association, higher education policy wonks, and the governor of Wisconsin all readily agree that our current present represents a crisis for the humanities. Cosigning that consensus would seem an obligatory opening for any stock-taking essay like this one, assessing fifty years of Marxist literary theory. Yet the struggle to justify the humanities, however vitiating at this moment, is not readily periodizable: as Friedrich Nietzsche and Matthew Arnold already argued, education in arts and ideas inherently clashes with the roiling wheels of modern democratic capitalism. Even though critical thinking and cultural difference are so frequently brandished as banners for the unceasing expansion of the world market, aesthetic-philosophical inquiry into the allusive values of the beautiful and the good can never be wholly assimilated to the regime of surplus value; reveling in uselessness can never be wholly incorporated in the reign of instrumental reason; heralding the singular and the universal can never be wholly squared with institutionalized pluralism. Within this long arc, the present moment can only appear new qua the quantitative intensification of the crisis after the 2008 financial meltdown and qua the internalization of crisis into an engine of methodological innovation and strife. Indeed, the very latest trends in the academic humanities—big data, thin description, positivist historicism, and the critique of critique—enjoy the veneer of the cool and roll deep as the funded, but must all be grasped as so much soul-searching and epistemic capitulation inevitably consequent upon crisis. This is of course not how these movements see themselves, but that is in no small part because they do not see the humanities' permanent war for legitimacy (nor even that war's contemporary front).

In this essay, I argue that Marxist theories of the novel, embedded within broader Marxian approaches to crisis and to the aesthetic, continue to frame urgent questions for the study of the novel and continue to illuminate avenues for future study that confronts contradictions in the social life of literature. Arguing this persistent importance requires tackling the contemporary repudiation of Marxist literary theory in the movement known as "postcritique." While numerous schools of recent literary criticism have resigned both the aesthetic and the political purviews of Marxism, the utopian dimensions of Marx's own work and of the finest Marxist literary readers still remain promising arcs for tracing the unique values of literary production, literary reading, and literary critique today.

The most prominent platform of postcritique is Rita Felski's *The Limits of Critique* (2015), poised as ex post facto manifesto for the past decade of method wars and

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prized at 28 million kroner by the government of Denmark, which argues that literary and arts scholars have fallen into a rote posture of detachment that ought to be replaced with inquiries into “attachments . . . affection and hope.” Felski dissects what she calls “the mood of critique”—the attitude of suspicion, the insinuation of expertise, the spatial logic of “digging down and standing back” that she associates with a dominance of Marxist and psychoanalytic approaches in the humanities, which all, in her analysis, hinder greater access to what matters about literary texts: their capacity to inspire attachments in the reader. Thoroughly inspired by the theologian and sociologist of science Bruno Latour, whose books *We Have Never Been Modern* and *Reassembling the Social* dismantle secularist conceits of science and pretenses of abstraction, Felski trains her sights on the unacknowledged theologies of critical distance in the humanities. Where critique is negative, Felski seeks the affirmative; where critique asks what a work does in the world, postcritique asks what a work means in the reading chair, and the diminished scope of the question ostensibly harkens its greater legitimacy—since, according to Latour, society does not exist, and epistemic pretensions must be leavened with microscopic focus on individual agents and the local networks that directly enmesh them. Felski, like others who cite the mood of critique as the cause of assailed humanities, ignores the boring necessity that disaffection and stagnation among humanists stem surely as much from the precarity of their labor and the contraction of their industry as from the negativity of their theories. In place of the Marxist technique of following the money and determination by the base, Felski offers determinism by Marxism: too much critique, too influenced by Marx and Freud, has made the humanities too negative, too hollow.

It should be underscored that Felski’s work is absolutely refreshing in its quest for more commanding studies of literature’s agency—for less emphasis on literature as ideology, as technology of domination, as chained to context—and for more comprehensive accounts of what is affirmative and affirmable in the humanities. But sourcing the crisis in method to our exhausted feelings about the mood of critique and proposing chipper feelings as the answer to crisis are both unfortunate psychologisms. Where most Marxists have thus greeted the book with—surprise!—critique, critique of psychologism, of raking strawmen, of misconstruing as hermeneutics the very antihermeneutic materialisms of Marxism and psychoanalysis, we can also embrace that Felski has the wrong answer (affect) to the right question: how can literary critics and humanists generally be more affirmative? There are heartier things to be affirmed about literature than the affects it arouses in individuals. Literary form is more social than that.

Far beyond endorphin boosting and empathogenesis, literature offers precisely the counterhegemony that has fueled the perennial crisis of the humanities. With a long and political-economic view of crisis, we can best conceptualize that the arts and literature contravene modern democratic capitalism through their constitutively speculative, generative utopianism—their deliberate building of something other than what already exists, their formalization of other, different, better ideas and relations than what is already here. In departing from the merely made world and proposing other worlds, literature operates both the negative and affirmative poles of critique, positing imaginative, alluring alternatives to our raging, dystopian hellscape of capitalist contradiction, climate catastrophe, and insurgent global

fascism. This conception of literature as critique must be studied and elaborated as a more robust ontology, as the basis of championing the humanities in endless crisis, and it must drive the next fifty years of Marxist literary theory. Until we do this theorizing and conduct our reading, writing, and teaching by its light, we cannot be postcritical, for we have never been critical.

To be critical, to fully exercise critique in literary criticism, would mean in this domain several things simultaneously. It would mean to pursue the full Kantian complement, the full Hegelian dialectic, the full Marxian normativity—activating within the “ruthless criticism of everything existing” the necessary correlative utopian striving for what does not exist. It would mean to take sufficient stock within criticism of the position of the critic, to become, in Edward Said’s notion, “secular”—querying the trite aggrandizement of the critic above readers, writers, and novels themselves. It would mean a dialectical critique that attuned itself to the dialectics in the world and the dialectics in the work—according the work of art dialecticity of its own.<sup>1</sup> It would mean addressing the specific techniques of critique proper to and figured in aesthetic presentation, which necessarily operates through an entirely different grammar than critique in Karl Marx’s *Critique of Political Economy* or Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s *Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, the way in which aesthetic mediation necessarily works figuratively, obliquely, syncretically. Literature deserves a dialectical theory of its own dialecticity.

The year *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* was founded, the French Marxist Pierre Macherey staked out a new path for literary theory: to “define literature as the critique of ideologies” (130). Fifty subsequent years of literary theory of the novel can be described ungloriously as stubborn errancy from this path. Rather than define literature as critique, critics have found ever new ways to define literature as ideology. The novel is a socially contingent illusion of transcendent value, the novel is the imaginary resolution of real contradictions, the novel strategizes containment, the novel misapprehends reality, the novel is hopelessly partial, the novel secures consent. The novel is positioned by postcritique—surface reading, distant reading, scientized reading—as an *object of knowledge* open at the best to calculation and accurate description, including computations of adverb quantities and magnetic resonance imaging of how readers feel. This to a large degree extends the canonical sense in which the novel is regarded as the handbook of modernity and specimen of low culture, portal onto nascent social and economic formations that contributes to making *them* the object of knowledge for accumulationist positivist historicism. Yet what we need now, and what we have always needed in the humanities, as both defense and offense, is not this *object-of-knowledge* approach but rather to position the novel as a *mode of knowing* (knowing language, knowing possibility, knowing sociality), precisely in the tradition of critique.

One obstacle to a comprehensive theory of the novel as critique is certainly an umbrella perception that the novel is somehow untheorizable. Our methods

<sup>1</sup> The genealogically inclined will no doubt find relevant Nicholas Brown’s insight that the idea of literature co-emerges with the dialectic as such, in the same time and place, with the Jena school romantics.

readily situate the novel as ideology or as evidence, but when questions of its ontology are broached, disruption reigns—the antigenre genre, the formless form, the evasively innovative relentlessly high-low, unabstractable I-know-it-when-I-see-“a novel”-on-the-cover. Within literary study, it is indeed common from a variety of methodological and political standpoints to refuse a theory of literature more broadly—championing instead literature as the singular, the resistance to theory, the anti-abstraction. Moreover, as Caroline Levine has observed, most of our discipline has argued itself out of the very possibility of theory through its systematic dismissal of generalization and the general, its dismantling of universals, its prizing of the situated and the particular (xii). But the novel, with its constitutive admixture of the general and the singular—the exceptional and the typical, the adventuresome and the quotidian, romance and realism—seems to demand theory, demand that the general be kept in play.

These nontheoretical tendencies are part and parcel of the scientizing trends in humanist methods for the past three decades and more, another obstacle. Felski correctly diagnoses the moribund state of literary criticism’s turgid historicism, yet for her the difficulty is that contextualism fails to explain how works attach to readers in the future—where for a strong literary ontology, one should also wonder after how literature detaches itself from its own present. Literary study has been dominated by methods that peg literature to causes, and by unambitious cataloging of the facts and artifacts of the past. Ceding our knowledge paradigms almost entirely to science, we humanists have failed to champion literature as more than evidence, more than information, more than data. Positivist historicism has inoculated us against literature’s critical capacity by correlating every word to a referent, every work to a cause, so comprehensively reducing literature’s conceptuality and creativity that its otherworldliness, its making of something new or else, falls completely out of sight. If literature is not thought but index, not creation but document, then there can be no possibility of its functioning as critique. Without independent ideas, it cannot promote alternatives.

Additionally, and most vexingly, there is a marked tendency, precisely within those traditions that do value theory—and that caution against the new historicist/Latourian Actor Network Theory replacement of capitalism with “power,” of exploitation with “discourse,” of causality with multilateral agency—to nonetheless operate in nondialectical fashion, subtracting the imaginative quotient from literature to emphasize truth telling. Thus it becomes almost thinkable that a novel of critique would exist as something like a genre variant—the social problem novel, the novel of purpose, reformist fiction, Dickens on a mission. From Friedrich Engels and Georg Lukács (post-*Theory of the Novel*) to Lucien Goldman and Fredric Jameson, on to Franco Moretti, Alberto Toscano, and Annie McClanahan, Marxist criticism has rather often followed this nondialectical path, embracing in the novel the limited operation of reporting the truths and reflecting the facts of the made world. Allotting the novel a certain diagnostic privilege, such theories have nonetheless reduced the novel’s ability to contemplate possible conditions (material and epistemic limits, phenomenal and noumenal problems, contradictions and their real movement) to a lesser ability to documentarily depict pre-existing conditions. In these cases, the novel is resolved into a position paper or dissolved into an imprint of a putatively

precedent truth, both options occasioning the reduction of literature to the univocity of discourse. Here, literature is critical to the extent that it resembles a nonliterary presentation of a critical stance; its ontology as literature is abrogated. And then there is the matter of the forgone utopianism, since the diagnostic arc commonly lacks a prognosticative complement. Where the dialectical conceit of the novel as critique encompasses *both* that the novel makes thinkable the conditions of social relations *and* that a utopian element is consequent upon this thinking, prevailing methods of literary Marxists have often fallen short on both of these counts.

By contrast, a theory that attends to the novel's immanent critique would necessarily focus on the gap between literary language and discourse, locating the possibility of critique not in a form that most approximates ordinary discourse but in a form of its own, the dynamic plurivocity of aesthetic thought in motion. The novel's conceptuality is neither linear nor logical but contrastive and accretive; when novels think they do not iterate evaluative judgments (child labor is bad, patriarchy sucks) but mobilize ideas in sensuous, plastic synthesis (the problem of child labor is inseparable from first-person narration and bildungsroman plotting). This special mode of conceptuality inheres in the novel's assembly of sometimes complementary, sometimes contrastive strata of representation; the novel idea is the multifaceted problem talking out of both sides of the mouth. Not univocal, not propositional, not thetic, the novel as critique is essentially thought on the move, the restless, spastic generativity of conceptuality riven by negation of dialecticity itself.

Notwithstanding the significant leaning of even Marxist aesthetic and cultural theory away from the dialectical itinerary for criticism and away from the dialecticity of art, it remains the case that the Marxian project should power the future theory of the novel, because Marx and Engels established the original procedure of immanent critique.<sup>2</sup> That is to say, since at least the 1844 manifesto for materialist method in *The German Ideology*, Marxism announces the rootedness of thought in the material problems of human production and reproduction, while it simultaneously elaborates the condition of possibility for *uprooting thought*: for revolutionary transformations that would entail revolutions in thought *and* for ideas as pivotal agents of such transformations. Marxism is the theory and practice of critique of this given sociality of capitalism, critique that this sociality itself generates, critique that must of necessity be immanent to what exists even while it works for the in-existent, setting out toward "a space adequate for human beings," as Ernst Bloch defined utopia (198). On these grounds of immanence, we might come to think of Marxism less as a possible theory of the novel than as sister to the novel, that elementary production of a world other than what already exists. In this kinship, Marxism then offers literature not the diagnosis of its determination, not the sociology of its

<sup>2</sup> The Marxist historian Moishe Postone elaborated a Hegelian philosophy of critique that he saw Marx nascently practicing and that can be usefully extended to our discussion of aesthetics: "The existing, 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" (87–88).

production, not the archive of its failures to referentially register the extant world, but the mirroring of literature's own critique, the full dialectic of keen departure from context and supple utopian pursuits. Marxism shares the novel's own practice of critique, the novel's own utopian impulses, the novel's own project to reimagine the social spaces of lived reality, and it is this commonality that forever justifies Jameson's claim for Marxism as "the untranscendable horizon" (*Political Unconscious* 20) of novel reading.

To connect the Marxist practice of immanent critique to a theory or practice of the aesthetic, let us remark the indispensable importance of *form* to Marxism's own methods of analysis and, indeed, the formalism of Marx's critical procedure, which commends formalism in our literary criticism too. What distinguished Marx's *critique* of political economy from the erudite discipline that was its object was intense focus on form. Labor theory predates Marx; formalist analysis of value, of commodities, of capital does not. Empirical analysis of exploitation and contradiction predates Marx; formalist analysis of capitalism's drive to sublimate the contradictions it precipitates does not. Quasi-philosophical discernment of the intellectual paradoxes of credit predates Marx; the theory of capitalism as a specific metaphysic, engendering pervasive new topoi of belief, newly ungrounded rationality, and newly reversing cause-and-effect does not. Each of these Marxian conceptual innovations is facilitated by thinking in terms of form; of representation of, against, and in matter; of structure, agency, and interlocking composites; of ideations innate in arrangement and order; of Platonic registers and their lapsarian instantiation. This formalism by which critique sets to work in the world might provide a portal to the novel as critique, for it suggests that readers might effectively behold the novel's immanent critique when the novel is regarded formalistically and that novels might be working at critique when they are contriving the consistency of their own form and theorizing the consistency of social forms.

Formalist regard is pivotal in Macherey, for whom the formal effect of the novel, strictly speaking, is the staging of a dynamic confrontation among literary elements (plot, point of view, imagery, setting) always producing the effect of conflict, imbalance, partiality, incompleteness; in turn, this effect reveals the inherently ideological perception of reality (136). Distinguishing between "knowledge" and "a certain kind of knowing," he emphasizes that the work is "not an instrument of knowledge . . . it is an indispensable revelation, a revealer, and it is criticism which helps us decipher these images in the mirror" (136). In disarticulating the novel from univocal speech, Macherey heightens the work of criticism; instead of reiterating the novel's iterations, the critic receives the novel's revelations, above all its "certain way of knowing" the truth of inevitable mediation. Novels reveal mediation as social fact, reveal the partiality of every given social formation materially, not just in the ideality of its representation. This ubiquity and ineluctability of mediation is suppressed by all those projects, left and right, that would seek coherent amplitude of the social field, a unity and groundedness and naturalness of relations. In this way, underscoring the mediated quality of sociality as such and acceding to this truth is the ultimate gesture of building a different kind of world, for it reaches toward what would be possible when the world's architectures and infrastructures and founding laws cease comporting as grounded.

These formal insights echo and anticipate others in Marxist literary theory. Before Macherey, Lukács tendered a theory of the novel whose formalism has often remained latent in the reception of his work. Although frequently cited in authorizing the demand that the novel *depict* social totality, Lukács had rather more precisely defined the novel as “thinking in terms of” or “operating a sense of” totality.<sup>3</sup> This “sense” directly contrasts any phenomenal experience, in which totality is not available as a referent. The novel is a kind of thinking concerned with a problem, both of which exceed the parameters of experience.<sup>4</sup> Across Lukács’s long career, his prescriptions and judgments of the novel indicate the formal constituents of this thinking, from the “architectural self-consciousness” he invokes in *Theory of the Novel* to the integral, “paradoxical fusion of heterogeneous and discrete components into an organic whole which is abolished again and again,” the “mutual determination” of narration, reportage and portrayal, character and plot, detail and meaning that he ordains in *Essays on Realism* and *Writer and Critic*. In missing Lukács’s emphasis on the novel as a specific “abstraction,” we miss the affinities he educes between the novel and theoretical perspicacity, we miss the theory proper to the novel.<sup>5</sup> And in missing the novel as theory, we miss its faculty for mediating conceptual and social problems, problems of totalization, of world making and world projecting, of social consistency, and in turn its utopian faculty for shaping worlds in general. We miss the novel as critique.

Lukács’s *Theory of the Novel* finds its late twentieth-century refiguration in Jameson’s *The Political Unconscious*, which remains the unsurpassed program for reading procedures that would, through their basis in Marxism as a “genuine philosophy of history,” discern what he crucially called “the solidarity” of the “social and cultural past,” “its polemics and passions, its forms, structures, experiences, and struggles, with those of the present day” (18). This allusive notion of solidarity is not really developed in the book but could be a beautiful alternative to the positivist reification of difference and quarantining of the past, since it would seem to involve both a temporal surpassing of narrow historicism and a formal appreciation of the novel’s specific illumination of the conjuncture of aesthetics and politics. Temporally, the *longue durée* history of the novel so decisively accompanies the history of capitalism that a mutual past and mutual present unite the novels of old with the lives of new. Formally, the kinds of social cohesion and world projecting undertaken by the novel directly analogize the predicaments, antagonisms, and ungroundedness of politics such that the novel of the past retains affinities with the socialities of the present, retains the possibility of aligning in solidarity with the utopian horizon of today’s fights.

However promising this notion of solidarity, the actual readings of novels in *The Political Unconscious* tend to show novels preoccupied by the pressing problems (determination, freedom, resentiments, etc.) but dogged by their own forms

<sup>3</sup> “The novel is the epic of an age in which the extensive totality of life is no longer directly given . . . yet which still thinks in terms of totality” (Lukács 56). (Der Roman ist die Epopöe eines Zeitalters, für das die extensive Totalität des Lebens nicht mehr sinnföällig gegeben ist . . . und das dennoch die Gesinnung zur Totalität hat.)

<sup>4</sup> On the novel as the working out of a problem, see Wasser.

<sup>5</sup> For more on this, see Bewes.

(resolutions, suspensions, displacements) and, furthermore, inadequate to their own historicity, requiring criticism for “restoring to the surface of the text the repressed and buried reality of this fundamental history,” that is, universal class antagonism (20). The solidarity fell out of the picture. In its stead, engaged criticism substitutes for solidarity; what was hailed at the outset as the necessity of the novel’s internal dialectic and dialectical location in history, its formal aegis for solidarity out of context, its structures of worlding and of sustaining antagonism, is transmuted in the book’s final chapter into the necessity for “dialectical criticism” (281). In place of a reading of novels as critique, Jameson conceives the ultimate criticism: reading that incorporates within itself consideration of the position from which a work is being read; dialectical criticism of works from the past would then always contain gestures or moments of presentism, which might itself become a platform for critique. Novels fail but criticism succeeds.

Thus Jameson’s bar of dialectical criticism did not yet actualize the novel’s immanent critique of the very problematics of totality and contemporaneity. But in the same year that *The Political Unconscious* was published, he made a decisive critical turn of his own, one that leads closer toward the possibility of a formal theory of the novel as critique. Also in 1981 he published his original essay on postmodernism (that would later become his most influential book), launching Jameson’s fascination with the aesthetics of space and the endeavor of cognitive mapping—fascinations that continue to indicate directions for a Marxist and formalist theory of the novel as the immanently critical projection of social space. Complementing Marxism’s theory of history is its tacit theory of space, whispered in Engel’s urban writings, shouted in *The Manifesto of the Communist Party’s* conjuring of more just orders, animating its affirmative utopian projects. Spatial figurations must be, I would argue, central to any stronger future theory of the novel, for they operate the novel’s formal specificity, and they open on to the ultimate question of a space adequate for human beings, utopia. It is the novel’s formal aegis to produce social space, and this project is inherently utopian, inherently actualizing an affirmative work of critique. The novel’s formal spatiality should center any theory of the novel as critique.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Here I would part with Pheng Cheah’s brilliant recent work *What Is a World?*, which intriguingly argues for a more robust philosophical concept of “world,” one that would entail the necessity that literature is a force of worlding, of world imagining, world mapping, and world making, whose faculty for effecting change in the extant world stems from its normativity. Literature critiques the world by opening to what ought to be. Cheah draws upon the Marxian tradition ambivalently: it provides the ur-model of critical normativity (“the proletarian revolution intervenes in the existing world . . . in order to actualize a higher world”) but it also classically “deprives literature of any worldly normative force” (10) by emphasizing the determination of the superstructure by the base. Cheah sees the spatial emphases of contemporary Marxists like Henri Lefebvre and David Harvey as problematic reinforcements of the existing world, since he argues that world conceived spatially can only ever be a descriptive category, whereas world conceived temporally is the portal to normativity. Cheah’s reduction of spatial theory to the reification of the extant globe overlooks the specific form of the novel in favor of the specific phenomenality of reading. In prizing temporality as the only condition of agential world striving, he dismisses that the proper formal constructions of the novel are integral spatial constructions.

Spatiality is intrinsic to utopian genres, which Jameson takes on directly in his biggest effort at readings of the novel as critique. *Archaeologies of the Future* is an epic study of genre in which the contours of the general corpus predominate over readings of individual texts, with the thoroughgoing claim that science fiction is almost constitutively utopian in its defamiliarization of its own contemporary contextual present, its enactment of a “structurally unique method for apprehending the present as history” (288), for activating the present as the determinate past of some indeterminate future. In the practice of his readings, however, this type of critical consciousness loosens into a wan unknowability of a better future; most of Jameson’s readings of individual utopian and sci-fi novels conclude not that the present is inadequate but that the *future* is—“the true vocation of utopian narratives” being “to confront us with our incapacity to imagine Utopia” (293). Formal inconsistencies—stray details, irreconcilable events, contradictory motifs—point up the impossibility of utopian consistency and proffer ideologies that are “properly liberal, rather than radical” (275), “homeopathy rather than antidote” (391). No individual novel Jameson treats in this massive work attains the level of critique, perhaps because the genre’s positivity (its elaborating the terrain of utopia as place, space, time) eclipses the open horizon of the possible; perhaps because “the utopian impulse” resists delimitation in “the utopian program” (4); and surely because even those novels committed to defamiliarization might lack an affirmation of a new normative commitment to justice. Defamiliarization is all there is, but it is not enough—not enough as an aesthetic of utopia and not enough as an activist strategy. How might the novel’s capacity to improvise worlds instruct us in how to build this world with more commons?

If Jameson’s ideas clear the ground for a theory of the novel as critique while his readings do not quite bear out the theory, it is also important to observe, to return to some of the resources from Marx himself, that the particular formalism in Jameson’s readings shows great potential for illuminating the very formal dynamic of the novel on which we should focus. He has yet to read the perfect book, but his method is sound: he seeks critique in the very forms of the novels he engages—in the effect of interplay between different formal features of the texts. It is this laminating of plot, style, narrative point of view, imagery, theme to one another in the interest of working out problems—this extrusion of linguistic elements into the volume of an idea—that instantiates novel thinking, that localizes novel critique. Jameson’s method of reading for form tacitly illustrates that formal actuation in the novel might itself model utopian constructions—its articulated levels, its resonant cohesion, its structural inclusion. The commons inscribed by free indirect discourse—the grammar of generality, collective consciousness, general will—is but one instantiation of a cooperative totality in which every part has a function, every worker a contribution, and the whole emerges only by way of concerted interactions.

As some of my itinerary through Jameson’s varying endeavors has likely shown, the theoretical, abstract possibility of novelistic critique necessarily introduces the concrete possibility of novelistic failure. Critique is a faculty of the novel form, a capacity, a potentiality—but not a given. This is a logical corollary of the theory, and the unwillingness to sift the grounds of how to judge failure

doubtless hinders the development of the theory. If there exists immanent critique in the novel, then there exist as well, perhaps most of the time, novels that fail at critique, whether because they lack imagination, lack the minimum norms of justice, or lack aesthetic consistency. Discerning these lacks must be a different enterprise from games of gotcha with literature's complicity; it must risk the kind of evaluative judgment of the beautiful, the good, the critical, the stuff that centers literary counterhegemony, and, sadly, the stuff that literary theory too often forswears and avoids.

To have been critical, theorists of the novel need to resume judgments and resume the dialectical critical procedure, to read the aesthetic dialectics and immanent critique in the novel. Since I put no little emphasis on reading spatially as affording the formalist and utopian dimensions necessary for immanent critique, on employing reading methods that fathom the spatiality of the dialectic within criticism but also within literature itself, perhaps in closing I can outline such a reading: Colson Whitehead's spatially inventive *The Underground Railroad* (2016) demands to be read as immanent critique, despite its embrace by Oprah's Book Club and the National Book Award and certainly despite the critical reception of it as part of an underground-railroad-industrial-complex dedicated to producing white mythology of white saviors.<sup>7</sup> The novel's core trope of literalizing the historical metaphor of the underground railroad into actual infrastructure—tracks and trains, locomotives and hand-cranked hubs and spokes, communication and ventilation—insistently connects labor and struggle. "Who built it?" the railroad passengers ask; "Who builds anything in this country?" a railroad agent answers (67). The black people who dug the tunnels and designed the routes are the black people who infrastructuralize struggle and survival, are the black people whose labor is the foundation of the violently accumulated wealth and territory that are these United States. This trope is laminated into an even bolder idea by the novel's temporal logics and temporal confabulations, its frequent dyssynchrony and its frequent, powerful presentism (present participles, second-person address to an implied reader, and direct present tense): the labor of struggle, the work to survive against the work of the nation, is not historical fiction in the past but searingly ongoing reality in the present. Still yet, the composite presentness of the labor of struggling and the struggle of laboring is intensified into an extensive social problem of the nation by the novel's spatial emphasis (its chapter division of the narrative by locations, its reservation of imagistic detail for setting, its fictifying disorientations and dislocations among north and south, its deterritorialization of "northness"). And this sweeping, implicative gathering of the past into the present, the South into the North, the fight for survival and the wages of work, attains even more purchase on the general state of things through the novel's unflinching third-person narration, so oblique to the testimonials and multifocal first persons of the literary tradition the text otherwise engages. With the syncretism of its formal elements, *The Underground Railroad* intones that the general history of America is not just the ongoingness of racial oppression but also the grace of striving. Crucially, there is more to this critical insight than the negative pole of diagnosis; the

<sup>7</sup> Schulz makes this argument in strong terms.

novel infrastructures of the dialectic also furnish the projective synthesis of a utopian pole. In its refusal to conclude in a promised land, in its relentless destabilization of place, in its river of time, *The Underground Railroad* contours a living movement, destination anywhere, rooted in labor as the path of living, that is the only way to get from this particular dispensation of social antagonism out to a new deal.

Granting the novel the faculty of critique might dispel the false dichotomy posited by postcritique between critiquing literature and loving it. It might fully esteem the special kind of thinking, the special kind of world making and world interpreting, that novels achieve. It might forge new links between the study of literature and the study of social existence, building new bridges for imaginative rebuilding. And wouldn't that be good?

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