

DEFAMILIARIZATIONS

Totality

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“TOTALITY” offers itself for reading under the rubric of “defamiliarization” less on the basis of our overfamiliarity with it than on account of our already estranged relationship to it. Not only literary critics but also cultural theorists, art historians, and philosophers bid “totality” adieu in the 1990s through the influence of Jean-François Lyotard’s forging of a causal link between thought under the sign of totality and action under the sign of totalitarianism, and his ensuing imperative, “Let us wage a war on totality.”¹ The war is over and done with now that the eminently influential Bruno Latour has decried the intellectual and political fallout of “totality” on his way to explicitly resignifying Margaret Thatcher’s dictum, “There is no such thing as society.”² Yet in the process of conflating academic method and political action, the victors in this war have shrouded totality in confusion. It is the goal of this brief essay to address this confusion, to defamiliarize our defamiliarization. Victorianists in particular should take up the problematic anew, since totality has long been the lynchpin of modernist and postmodernist dismissals of Victorian literature as at once naïve and sinister, encyclopedic and imperialist, bloated, boring, and baggy. When Victorianists have tried to defend against these dismissals, they have generally emphasized that the fiction of the period is more fragmented, self-reflexive, and modernist than such charges admit—that, in short, the novel should not be associated with totality. But this cedes too much ground to bad definitions of totality. Another path to reclaim the aesthetic strengths and epistemic benefits of our period’s literature would be to strike at the root, regrounding better definitions.

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To do so, we can start with a claim that totality is not an object but a method.³ It is not an ontological positivity awaiting representation in literary content. It is an orientation for thinking, an orientation that can guide both theory and literature. Indeed, the history of the concept of totality is coeval with that of the modern notion of “literature” and with the rise of the novel. To say this is less to make historical observations about capitalism and modernity—though it is surely that—than it is to make a metadiscursive observation about the mutual implication and interanimation of the idea of totality and the practices of representation that make such an idea thinkable. In general, we might note that totality cannot be thought without art: without radically imposed contours, without mediation. And at the same time, theories of art have often limned the question of totality, of how different modes and genres and media formalize totality, achieve totality, of what is a total work of art. But beyond this generality of art’s performative production of an intensive whole, the novel enjoys particular privilege in this illumination. As narrative prose it involves investigating causality. To hold itself together, a novel asks what holds a world together, exploring infrastructure, institutions, identities, ideologies. The paradigmatic dialectical art, it interweaves the general and the particular, the exemplary and the exceptional, the individual and the social, the extraordinary and the banal. It is a world-making art form, an art form of producing socialities, which discloses the contingency and artifice of any social formation; it is the preeminent art form unique to capitalism.

We will return to this interanimation between literature and theory, but first a few words about the emergence of the concept as a substantive topic in philosophy and theory in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Totality is intrinsically *theoretical*, insofar as the aegis of theory, from the Greek *theorein*, to look at or behold, is the movement from seeing an object to speculating about an object, endeavoring to understand its essence, while simultaneously accounting for the subject doing the speculating. It is therefore a seeing of seeing, a reflexive circuit that many have characterized as *totalizing*, as an immodest endeavor to incorporate and master both object and subject. For Immanuel Kant, often heralded as the origin of theory’s distinct departure from philosophy, we can know the categories and reflexes by which we know—see ourselves seeing in that respect—but we cannot overcome a split between subject and object, nor between things and appearances, nor between what is empirically sensible and what is intellectually conceptualizable. Kant’s critical system (his critique of the power of judgment, and of reason in practical and

pure expressions) made overtures toward providing a total accounting of the world and our processing of it, a total accounting of a gap between the two. G. W. F. Hegel then seized on these overtures and set a different itinerary for theory: it could not only map the cleavage that splits knower from known even as the knower knows knowing, but it could speculatively overcome that split. Totality for Hegel shifts from the system of oppositions schematized by Kant to the system of integrating oppositions. The absolutely crucial point here, Hegel's dramatic and still-undigested intervention, is that the ensuing integration amounts to nothing other than contradiction itself. Totality is not the harmony of subject and object but the field of their contradictory connection and disconnection. The theorist who can know contradiction and keep it moving, recognize its power to propel new syntheses and new negations, is the theorist oriented toward totality and toward fulfilling the totalizing arc of reason, whose endpoint is not stasis but ongoingness.

Karl Marx's advance in the method of totality starts by delineating the overly idealist trappings of Hegelian contradiction, answering with a materialist version of contradiction. The totality that is contradiction exists not merely inside the mind of the philosopher-theorist but in the relations of everyday life as well, which support and even determine that mind. Historical reality itself is this field of contradiction, including the tension between what the theorist knows about knowing and what they know about the historical effects and social consequences of their knowing. Marx proposes not only that theory must account for the material conditions of eating, drinking, dwelling, and thriving in which thinking takes shape and takes place, but also that it must account for how its descriptions of the world and destinations for knowledge themselves contribute to, rationalize, or destabilize the particular, contingent social context within which the theory operates. Marx takes Hegel's formulation of totality as contradiction and adds the heft that contradictions are a crucial element of any human society, since all social formations are contingent and ungrounded, all modes of production are particular and do not exhaust all possibilities or emanate from nature. The particular historical conjuncture within which totality first becomes a widespread topic of inquiry is the consolidation of the capitalist mode of production on a world scale, a mode of production distinguished by its goal of surplus extraction and by its simplification of social contradictions. Within the Marxian notion of totality, recognizing contingency means recognizing the very prospect that there are other possibilities; recognizing history means recognizing open futures; recognizing the social context of theorizing means

recognizing that there is no unsocial theorizing. These commanding and enabling notions of the imbrication of situatedness and openness, determination and freedom, prime totality as the trajectory of dynamic, dialectical relation.

Marx made the category of totality indispensable to what he thought of as theory. Without totality, no theory. György Lukács therefore declared that “the point of view of totality . . . constitutes the decisive difference between Marxism and bourgeois science.”⁴ Thought which does not understand its own class interests is not theory, since it has not sufficiently reflected upon itself. Thought which takes what is concretely before us while failing to understand the illusion of immediacy is not theory, since it reifies intellectually that which is reified socially. For Raymond Williams, in a prescient stroke, the decisiveness of totality rests on its difference from complexity, the assemblage, the network (all those Latourian buzzwords postdating him). Rather than a positive notion of existing complex practices that form a whole and interlock in a complicated way, totality must refer, he insists, to reading for the whole’s tendencies, to the “intention” of capitalism, and must therefore point to the possibility of other tendencies, of countertotalities, that decomplete the whole.⁵

Fredric Jameson responds to this long tradition of connecting totality and theory by dialecticizing the opposition between theory and object that I invoked to defamiliarize totality. For him, the historical advent of postmodernity transforms the potential for totality qua object, since the space-time compression of advanced globalization, the end of the Cold War, the commodification of everything, and the subordination of the nation-state to the multinational corporation substantiate the totalizing impulse of capitalism—its tendency to produce a contradictory unity, penetrating ever more widely across the globe and deeply into the logic of subjectivity and representation. Totality qua method is the attempt to reckon with totality qua object, a historically specific object. The reckoning must be careful, for the object is tricky: “totality is not available for representation, any more than it is accessible in the form of some ultimate truth,” it is instead the “properly unrepresentable ensemble of society’s structures as a whole.”⁶ Harkening back to the Hegelian importance of contradiction, Jameson transfigures any notion of totality-as-object into totality-as-contradiction, while activating totality as method in the interpretive practices of mapping contradictions. To theorize in terms of totality is not to produce some suffocating enclosure of false unity but rather to chart the historical process of the capitalist mode of production’s foreclosure of other modes of production, and

at the same time to resist that foreclosure by highlighting contradictions, by insisting on other possibilities, by complementing the chart of the past with hopes for the future.

If this sketch of the history of theorizations of totality illustrates how consistently totality has signified a principle or method rather than a concrete thing, then we can turn back to the fact of this history's parallel with the rise of the novel. This parallel already tacitly structures one of the most abiding theories of the novel, which precisely defines the novel *as a theory of totality*. Lukács centers totality as the novel's distinctive problem, point of view, desire, and method. As he puts it most emphatically, "[T]he 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. / *Der Roman ist die Epopöe eines Zeitalters, für das die extensive Totalität des Lebens nicht mehr sinnfällig gegeben ist . . . und das dennoch die Gesinnung zur Totalität hat.*"⁷ This "thinking in terms of" or sustaining "a sensation" of totality is a paraconceptual operation that shouldn't be reduced to unfigurative depiction but rather manifests in other, intensive ways. For Lukács the novel provides an artificial formal totality that compensates for an absent social totality, a mythical premodern fused world now lost. It is not always evident what the exact aesthetic contours and styles of this form are, and indeed they change over time for him. Unfortunately, in this vacuum he has often been received as advocating for a referential form of totality—literary realism as the mimesis of social diversity and document of class society. Yet he actually propounded a less referential, more figurative, and indeed abstract notion of how novelistic representation interfaces with totality. Across his body of works, including across what he himself described as his break from humanist to Marxist, he emphasized that the form of the novel should be beheld as fundamentally *integral*, as an integration of component parts, a balance of detail and narration, of typical characters in typical circumstances who also broke the bonds of type, of objective presentation with subjective tendency, a tension of general and particular, exceptional and typical, wonderful and banal. Totality, that in terms of which the novel thinks, is therefore not the content that the novel iterates but the form of resonance between character, plot, imagery, temporality into an integrated system. The disposition toward the integral, like the affinity for the intention of the system, shapes totality as method.

Mistaking the novel as a depiction of totality (whether one is pro- or anti-) extends far beyond readers of Lukács. It guides prominent critical traditions from Roland Barthes's puncturing of the mythological

wholeness of Jules Verne to Edward Said's foundational critique of *Mansfield Park* for not depicting scenes in Antigua to Leigh Claire La Berge and Alison Shonkwiler's identification of "the flourishing across different media of realisms attentive to . . . substantial economic crisis . . . express[ing] a desire for the most thorough possible indexing of capitalism."⁸ Most recently, in recognizing that our actually existing totality today, unevenly distributed and properly unrepresentable, is capitalogenic climate change, Amitav Ghosh has decried a lack of contemporary fictions about this totality, fictions in which settings of ecological destruction and plots of resource wars directly represent. In her review of *The Great Derangement*, Kate Marshall has astutely deemed this "the demand for content," and I find that a helpful synonym for the misdefining of totality as an object.⁹ Ubiquitous as a critical reflex, the demand is wrong on both sides: it vexingly dissolves literariness into subject matter, and this same fervor for indexicality perpetuates the illusion that totality is available as a referent.

What if we reappraised the novel's historical connection to the topic of totality and approached the novel as the medium that takes totality as a method rather than an object? Its purview would then be less the depiction of a concrete totality, diverse classes and typical types, historical context and temporal duration, but rather the specific method, the specific kind of thinking that crafts a formal equivalent, in abstraction and generalization and integration, to the social form of capitalist totality. Critics like Tim Bewes, Michael Cunningham, and Emily Steinlight have recently been elaborating this possibility: the novel thinks in terms of totality by virtue of the strange abstraction of free-indirect discourse, by the dialecticity of general and particular, abstract and concrete, by the impersonal massification of the social as idea. I suggest that we follow this lead to most effectively defamiliarize totality. Instead of the "demand for content," we readers interested in the conceptual power of the Victorian novel and/or interested in how literary experience intervenes in social formation and transformation face the challenge to enunciate some other demand. For simplicity's sake, we might try the demand for form.

Form would need to mean here the integrated connection of the multiple components of novelistic discourse—narration, plot, setting, characterization, temporality, imagery—and the way these structures all synthesize one another, generating an indwelling theory, an intrinsic abstraction. "Abstraction" is after all the other key definition of the novel's form that Lukács gives alongside its attitude of totality. How do novels generate speculative syntheses? How do impersonal narration and free-

indirect discourse push toward conceptuality? How do novels abstract from temporal experience? Where the demand for content leaves the partisans of expressive totality championing the concrete heteroglossia of polyfocal narratives in multiple geopolitical locations in changing times—think *Bleak House*, *Cane*, *White Teeth*, *Cloud Atlas*—then reading for abstraction in/as form leads to a different, intricate totality. Think *The Intuitionist*, which enunciates a theory of race as medium through its problematic of immediacy, its present tense, its indistinct setting, and its detective frame, or *Wuthering Heights*, which enunciates a theory of the social antagonisms that predate and will outlast capitalism, through the combination of its frame narrative, imagistic, and emplotted critique of property with the archaism of its pathetic setting, architectural framework, and repeated, culminative, violent conflicts on the hearth. Forms that exercise the method of totality are not naïve, copious, nor disciplining but instead strategically repetitive, interweaving their elements, and performing thereby those relations of determining and overdetermining interpenetration which make up the “intention” of the social form of capitalism.

Just as Lukács was keen to distinguish good abstraction from bad abstraction, we should mark that the problem of evaluative judgment is inescapable when reading for totality—parsing works that engage the question of totality from works that don't. Elaborating the criteria for judging aesthetic abstraction represents a much more interesting task for the theory of the novel now than our inherited complex, from Ian Watt to Guido Mazzoni, of describing the novel as concretizing, individualizing, and particularizing, than our ossified reflex of perpetual longing for fiction that cancels its own fictionality, for realism that annuls its own deliberate break from journalism, for novels that forget they are theory and content themselves with the concrete. With criteria of the novel's formal effectuation of abstraction, its mediation of the abstractions of social life—the bad abstraction (capitalism) and the good abstraction (the merely formal character of sociality)—we can wield its faculties, read it to think with it. Novels practice totality as method, the method we urgently need, to synthesize the looming destruction of this world, and speculatively make the world after.

NOTES

1. Lyotard, “Answering the Question,” 46.
2. Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 5.

3. I make this distinction with inspiration from Jameson's insistence that totality is not a referent and Bewes's encapsulation of the Lukács-Bloch debate as one between "principle" and "object" (Jameson, *Political Unconscious*, 55; and Bewes, "Free Indirect," 10).
4. Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, xx.
5. Williams, "Base and Superstructure," 5.
6. Jameson, *Political Unconscious*, 55; *Postmodernism*, 51.
7. Lukács, *Theory of the Novel*, 56.
8. La Berge and Shonkwiler, *Reading Capitalist Realism*, 3.
9. Marshall, "Readers of the Future."

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