

The Epic of Lost Totality¹:
Marxism, Literature, and the Labor of Literacy

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Abstract: This essay engages with a triumvirate of critics who emerged under the Marxist umbrella—Georg Lukács, Walter Benjamin, and Bertolt Brecht—and who wrestled explicitly, if not always correspondingly, with literary aesthetics. It examines the theorizations of these thinkers, in some sense to recoup Marx’s radicalism apropos literature, while at the same time undermining and complicating that radicalism. Social being *does* significantly determine our consciousness, the essay argues, often by way of *alphabetic literacy*. That is, crucial to the formation of the self—with formation here not exclusively implying progress—is the ability for us as *knowers* to *separate ourselves from what we know*. Often these authors, in eliding that cognitive process, made claims about “reaching” the masses and/or “representing” them that were potentially specious. By bringing orality and alphabetic literacy into the Marxist literary fold, the aim ultimately is to embolden Marxist commitment to the belief that aesthetic phenomena must be studied in a context of socio-historical processes.

Keywords: alphabetic literacy; Benjamin, Walter; Brecht, Bertolt; literary aesthetics; literary theory; Lukács, Georg; orality

¹ I take this from Demetz.

The works of culture come to us as signs in an all-but forgotten code, ... as fragments of a totality we have long since lost the organs to see.
—Fredric Jameson²

It is of course the bourgeoisie, not the proletariat, whose dream expresses the uneasiness of an overly full stomach.
—Susan Buck-Morss

Marx and Shakespeare, as a Preamble to Literary Theory

Karl Marx, champion of the proletariat, was of course himself decidedly bourgeois: an “armchair revolutionary,”³ more suited to the library carrel than the factory line and steeped in the literary and intellectual tradition of his class. In a childhood game played with his daughters in 1865, the erudite political philosopher conceded that his favorite occupation was “book-worming”; as for his favorite poets, they were “Shakespeare, Aeschylus, Goethe” (qtd. in Prawer 390). Indeed, Marx’s son-in-law reported the Marx household was a veritable “Shakespeare cult” (Demetz 154)—a claim buttressed by Marx’s daughter, Eleanor, who wrote in her “Reflections of Mohr” (1895) that her father “read the whole of Homer, the whole of *Nibelungen Lied*, *Gudrun*, *Don Quixote*, the *Arabian Nights*. As to Shakespeare,” she continues, “he was the Bible of our house, seldom out of our hands or mouths. By the time I was six I knew scene upon scene of Shakespeare by heart” (Marx and Engels, *On Literature* 149).⁴ Indeed, were I bold enough to speculate where Marx learned his skill as a dialectical rhetorician—e.g., “It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but on the contrary their social being that determines their consciousness”—I would say it was not from Hegel, but from *Shakespeare*, whose plays bristle with such cunning, poetic transpositions—e.g., “What an exchange had this been without boot [money]! What a boot [profit/footwear] is here with this exchange!” (*The Winter’s Tale*, IV.iv.798-799). The truth is, had Marx succeeded in his youth at writing *his own* poetry and literature—he attempted a verse-drama, lyric poetry, even a farcical novel (Eagleton 1; Prawer 23)—we might not have Marxism, the political philosophy and praxis, at all.

But this essay is ultimately not about Marx. In truth, it plans to engage with a triumvirate of critics who emerged later under the Marxist umbrella—Georg Lukács, Walter Benjamin, and Bertolt Brecht—and who wrestled explicitly, if not always correspondingly, with literary aesthetics. Nevertheless, before getting to them, it is worth our thinking through Marx’s own grappling with the arts, as it was his doctrinaire ideology *in concert with* his great affection for literature that is the complex nodal point upon which this paper’s argument pivots. After all, the defensibly “highbrow” literature that Marx so admired did not always make a compatible bedfellow with his political principles. While art and literature were “part of the very air Marx

² The following quote appears in *Marxism and Form* (416).

³ I take this from Sylvia Nasar, in her review of Francis Wheen’s 2000 biography *Karl Marx: A Life*.

⁴ See also Paul Lafargue, who writes in his “Reminiscences of Marx” (1890-91), “Every year he read Aeschylus in the Greek original. He considered him and Shakespeare to be the greatest dramatic geniuses humanity ever gave birth to. His respect for Shakespeare was boundless: he made a detailed study of his works and knew even the least important characters...”; and later, “He ranked Cervantes and Balzac above all other novelists...He admired Balzac so much that he wished to write a review of his great work *La Comédie Humaine* as soon as he had finished his book on economics” (Marx and Engels 152).

breathed; while, as a “formidably cultured German intellectual in the great classical tradition of his society” (Eagleton 1), Marx drew frequent allusions in his earlier writings to, say, Shakespeare, the Bible, Goethe, and Molière (Praver 48); and, even more, while Marx himself acknowledged on a page of the *1844 Manuscripts* that “If you want to enjoy art, you must be an artistically cultured person” (qtd. in Morawski 25), that very culture with which he was so enamored potentially *undermined* his political dogma.

His self-squelched attempt to grapple with classical Greek literature and art reveals something of this difficulty. In short, Marx had to concede to an “unequal relationship” between ancient Greek epic and economics-qua-artistic *production*—though this he chalked up to the Greeks’ relatively embryonic societal state. As Eagleton puts it, the Greeks, argued Marx, “were able to produce major art not *in spite of* but *because of* the undeveloped state of their society” (12). Demetz cogently points to the weakness of Marx’s apologetic paean:

This unexpected elegy on the golden but irretrievably lost days of Greek myth and art only conceals the fact that Marx studiously avoids the real problem—the contradiction between his theory of the dependence of art upon economics and his personal faith in the timeless value of the Greek achievement. (69-70)

Perhaps that is why in an incomplete 1857 fragment of *Critique of Political Economy*, where Marx attempted to apply his theory of economic determinism to an actual concrete phenomenon—in this case, ancient Greek art—he found himself “completely incapable of encompassing the reality” and (so?) never again returned to the drafts of that fragment (71-72).⁵ Indeed, the only work of literature that Marx addresses at any length in his published writings is a contemporaneous novel by Eugene Sue, *Les mystères de Paris*, a hefty, “middlebrow” best-seller that is, at turns, thrilling, maudlin, and operatic—and which Marx was, thereby, able critically to dismantle (102). In this way, the “disquieting doubts” earlier raised by the artistic ancients were put conveniently to rest in order for Marx to more programmatically promote his economic theory (72). As Demetz aptly phrases it—bringing us conveniently back to Marx’s famous dialectical phrase which earlier I cited—the Foreword of 1859 formulated the theory of economic causality in art with a radicalism hardly to be outdone: “...*It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but on the contrary their social being that determines their consciousness...*” (72, emphasis added).

In some sense, I want to recoup Marx’s radicalism here—apropos literature, at least—while at the same time undermining and complicating that radicalism. Social being *does* significantly determine our consciousness, I want to argue (though without capitulating to anything so deterministic as Marx might want), and it does so by way of *alphabetic literacy*. By this I mean that, crucial to the formation of the self—with formation here not exclusively implying progress—is the ability for us as *knowers* to *separate ourselves from what we know*. (This is a concept I borrow from the classicist Eric Havelock.) In short, through the tool of literacy, through being able to write things down such that we can free our minds for other sorts of intellectual activity—and this we can do because we are no longer beholden to carrying our histories within ourselves—production of thought, of ideas, of narratives, and of the *self* quite literally is able to fan out in

⁵ That fragment, as Demetz tells us, “remained unknown to the first generation of his disciples until Karl Kautsky edited the text and published it as a hypothetical introduction to his edition of the *Critique of Political Economy* (1902-3)” (71-72).

myriad novel, adventurous, enticing, and sometimes demoralizing ways. I say “we” intentionally, for to deny that only those able to read this very paper are not *already* part of an elite group is to turn a blind eye to the non-literate (oral) proletariat, who may not always be party to the sorts of engagement permitted by the knower-known separation. Oral individuals may understandably be—indeed, may *by necessity* be—functioning outside the epistemic arena of a decidedly literacy-*produced* cohort of selves. Let us not forget that reading and writing is a *labor*, a process whereby—as Marx articulates in *Capital* (1867)—“man mediates, regulates and controls his material interchange with nature by means of his own activity...[A]cting upon nature outside of him, and changing it, he changes his own nature also” (Marx and Engels 53).

Of course Marx, as earlier I mentioned, wrote neither at any length nor in any focused fashion on literature. When dealing with Marx’s writings about art, we are always, as Morawski reminds us, “treating *disiecta membra*,” “scattered...passages which we must organize and *reconstruct* as to their coherence” (12). And so, in order to suggest how orality and our subsequent move away from that way of knowing disrupts, confounds, and sometimes inadvertently illumines some of the rationales underlying Marxist thinking about the arts, I now enter the conversation that transpired between those prominent literary theorists who followed Marx: Lukács, Benjamin, and Brecht. If my long preamble on Marx still strikes the reader as having been an unnecessarily slow way into this more telescoped plan, keep in mind, once more, that one of my overarching purposes is to highlight the great affinity that that Poet of the Proletariat had for works of literature—works with which many of those proletariat, ironically enough, could not possibly have engaged; and here I do not mean simply because they couldn’t read them (i.e., words on a page), but because—to reiterate in slightly different terms—the *labor* that went into the bourgeois consumption and production of writing and print culture, both ontogenetically and phylogenetically, resulted in ways of knowing to which those proletariat were not privy and, even more, to which they might have good reason and inclination to *resist*.⁶ More explicitly to make this case, I shall recast through the lens of orality and alphabetic literacy—somewhat dialectically, I suppose—the abovementioned theorists’ charged éclats regarding three particular arguments or concepts central to the Marxist literary criticism lineage: the role of alienation; the privileging of realism; and the subsequent revolt against that realism.

The Bright Side of Alienation

Isolation, fragmentation, alienation: these are watchwords for any good Marxist, fraught as they are with the sense of human atomization that ensues in a system where commodification reigns. They also invariably underscore the disaffection and objectification so crucial to the Marxist sense of man in a capitalist society—something Lukács would take up recurrently in his critical oeuvre. Indeed, as Lukács posits in *History of Class Consciousness* apropos the possibility of a society wresting itself from this state, “Only when the whole life of society is thus fragmented into the isolated acts of commodity exchange can the ‘free’ worker come into being” (91). For

⁶ Here, I see important overlap with Jameson’s privileging of the “permutational scheme” of the *combinatoire* (“Magical” 157), which possesses strategic value (for Marxism certainly, says Jameson) “in its ability to coordinate the synchronic relationship between work and immediate historical situation and the equally indispensable diachronic perspective in which that situation is itself grasped as a moment of an ongoing infrastructural evolution: it is this diachronic dimension which then permits a qualitative evaluation of the form as well—by juxtaposing it with what had been possible at other, structurally different moments of social development” (160).

Lukács—at least in this particular work—“Nature,” which implies that which “acquires the meaning of what has grown organically, what was not created by man” is in strict contrast to “the artificial structures of human civilization” (136). For Lukács, thus—and this he will admit to unequivocally—“Nature” signifies an “authentic humanity, the true essence of man liberated from the false, mechanising forms of society; man as a perfected whole who has inwardly overcome, or is in the process of overcoming, the dichotomies of theory and practice, reason and the senses, form and content...” (136-137). For this liberation to be accomplished successfully, Lukács proposes, the temporal *present* must be tackled as a problem of history that demands mediation (158). One must operate from the *inside* of history, he asserts, rather than treat history as an environment from which man (and it is always *man*) is distanced. *Only in art*, says Lukács, is the relationship of standing outside any given landscape “appropriate and unproblematic” (158).⁷

I find this last, quickly broached and fairly expediently abandoned admission highly intriguing and certainly problematic—fraught, one might say, with a sudden capitulation to isolation and momentary atomization. Why would one applaud in art what one so adamantly resists in every other way? And can we really so easily cleave the realms, as Lukács does, between viewing art and viewing history? Indeed, it seems that Lukács, in this statement, is falling back on the Kantian notion of aesthetic disinterestedness—before swiftly racing forward to erase it. Then again, perhaps there is something conceptually undergirding the experience of isolation—and even of *alienation*—that makes it, in a more positive sense, desirable to stand contemplatively outside of art.

My lead-in is likely quite obvious: this bright side of alienation—this “desirable isolation,” let us call it—is induced by the long-term legacy of *alphabetic literacy*. Literacy, I wish to posit, has crucial bearing on any determination regarding the “appropriate” relationship between art and distance, not to mention between history and proximity. True, while alienation, as I wish to discuss it here, may only marginally relate to any literary theorizing in the Marxist tradition—I will, however, come back to how it *was* discussed by Brecht—the concept is so crucial to Marxist dialogue that I feel it mandates broaching. Besides, if as Johnson puts it, Lukács is, through his abovementioned moves, attempting a social theory that “offered a real hope for the radical overcoming of an alienated existence and the re-establishment of authentic human life” (9-10), we benefit from evaluating not only the loaded term *alienated* in light of what comprises a distinctly literate episteme, but just as crucially the term *authentic*.

Textual reading privatizes: I could hardly put it more simply. One escapes by oneself and *for oneself* into the book, alone and in *desirably isolated* fashion; and this sort of epistemic praxis, as we might call it, “induces a more solitary and autonomous relation to a subject, one which in turn encourages private thought” (Nayar 120).⁸ (No doubt, the “cult of the individual,” which

⁷ To give Lukács his due, here he is suggesting that when history, unlike art, is “forced into the present,” a chasm opens up, one that is decidedly pernicious: “As a result of its incapacity to understand history, the contemplative attitude of the bourgeoisie became polarised into two extremes: on the one hand, there were the ‘great individuals’ viewed as the autocratic makers of history, on the other hand, there were the ‘natural laws’ of the historical environment” (*History* 158).

⁸ It is fundamentally for this reason that, following Jameson (though not his Marxist program necessarily), I cannot subscribe intellectually to New Historicism. For, as Ian Buchanan aptly points out, New Historicists create something of the “illusion of interiority” through their exhumation of objects and documents from the distant past in order to “fashion a montage (Jameson’s word) of details creating the illusion of interiority”; in this way, “the

Emile Durkheim conceived as connected to the decline of traditional religion [Lynch 114], owes something genealogically to the culture of writing and, even more so, to that of print.) In other words, authenticity of the (private, solitary, autonomous) self is highly molded by one's capacity to engage with texts outside of oneself—and, so, one could justifiably aver that the *reading* human being is the most artificial type of human of all. Certainly the unavoidable wresting of oneself from the collective, which private reading additionally fosters, was something that Walter Benjamin well—and, hence, ambivalently—understood:

The birthplace of the novel is the solitary individual, who is no longer able to express himself by giving examples of his most important concerns, is himself uncounseled and cannot counsel others... In the midst of life's fullness, and through the representation of fullness, the novel gives evidence of the profound perplexity of living. ("Storyteller" 80)

In this way, Benjamin inadvertently brings out a paradox in Marx's belief that literature is salutary; that, in the words of S.S. Praver, it "diagnoses our corruption"; that it "will have its part to play in our cure" in the combat of alienation (80). And what is that paradox? That the literacy that breeds isolation—*especially* when texts can be mechanically and richly circulated in print—is the putative cure to itself; that the very producer of alienation—the book (the book of *good* literature for Marx)—is that which will, funnily enough, thwart alienation.

Even more, are not the novels of Balzac or the sonnets of Shakespeare (which surely Marx would say enhance species consciousness) equally open to accusations of their having *fetishized* conceptions of individual particularity—given that they now circulate primarily as printed texts and are consumed in typically isolated and, indeed, atomizing fashion? They are themselves commodities that stand in for social relations. Surely this suggests that they induce a form of self-fragmentation, of utter retreat even (picture Marx alone in his armchair, a candle by his side, feasting—nay, gorging—on the delightful wine-sack slaying episode in *Don Quixote*). One alienates oneself from actual human beings in order to plunge into the artificial humanity of letters on a page. Of course, this is not the isolation of the despairingly non-liberated proletariat—and, in deference to Marx, his rallying point *was* praxis. Still, in counterpoint and as a sort of dialectical doppelganger, could we not say that Marx's willingly self-atomized and intimate relishing of literature—not to mention, of literary qualities that are *negligible* apropos the oral episteme (e.g., semantic density; irony; psychic time; subjectivity; open endings, to name a few [Nayar 95-124])—signals his literature—"Shakespeare, Aeschylus, Goethe"—as a potential *opiate of the bourgeoisie*?⁹

historian's 'eye' begins to seem as though it is mimicking the subject's 'I' and the illusion is formed. We feel as though we are seeing 'their' world in the same way 'they' did and as a consequence 'they' always seem more modern than we expected" (54).

⁹ Indeed, in his 1929-1935 *Prison Notebooks*, Antonio Gramsci would later state that escapism "can be applied to all forms of literature, whether popular or artistic, from the chivalric poem...to the various kinds of serial novels. Is all poetry and literature therefore a narcotic against the banality of daily life?" (qtd. in Denning 67).

The Subjectivity of Representing the Real

While the above section, as earlier I conceded, is relatively at-arm's-length from explicit Marxist theorizing vis-à-vis literature, this and the next section tackle head-on Marxist aesthetic principles, primarily those elucidated by the critic Lukács and the dramatist Brecht.

Lukács' firmly believed that an artistic reflection of reality, when executed well, would have nothing "transcendent in it...but rather [would be] the reflection of the real existence, the real development of mankind" (qtd. in Johnson 42). The "great novels," in other words, according to Lukács ("From" 241), promoted not religion but *realism*—an image of society's wholeness. For Lukács, a superlative work was, to quote Eagleton's elegant summation, "rich in a complex, comprehensive set of relations between man, nature and history," with these relations "embody[ing] and unfold[ing] what for Marxism is most 'typical' about a particular phase of history" (28). The task of the writer, so Eagleton continues, was, from the Lukácsian viewpoint,

to flesh out these "typical" trends and forces in sensuously realized individuals and actions; in doing so [the author] links the individual to the social whole, and informs each concrete particular of social life with the power of the "world historical"—the significant movements of history itself. (28)

Superlative literature, for Lukács, produces roadmaps of reality, we might say, sprawling canvases that reflect the strata of society in all their interconnectedness, and that thereby exhibit the struggles between those strata—especially the struggles of certain sets of individuals beset by capitalism. Hence Lukács can be found touting the realist writer Arnold Zweig for having anticipated "a whole series of essential features of the new [imperialist] war in his novels *Sergeant Grisha* and *Education before Verdun*" ("Realism" 47). What Zweig did there, so Lukács continues, "was to depict the relationship between the war at the front and what went on behind the lines, and to show how the war represented the individual and social continuation and intensification of 'normal' capitalist barbarity" (47).¹⁰ Why were Zweig's moves laudable? Because, as Lukács directly expounds, "the realist must seek out the lasting features in people, in their relations with each other and in the situation in which they have to act; he must focus on those elements which endure over long periods and which constitute the objective human tendencies of society and indeed of mankind as a whole" (47).

Of course, we might complicate Lukács' picture by taking into account that an oral conception of what constitutes both the human tendencies of society, as well as of mankind as a whole, includes—even *mandates* the inclusion of—the realm of the supernatural. While no room may exist for Lukács—as it did not either for Marx or Engels—"for any religious or mystical experience that claimed access to supernatural truth"; while no space was permitted for a theory that sees literature "as speaking in any way of a numinous or uncanny Beyond" (Praver 101), that is to a significant degree because of the alphabetically-literate "luxury" these intellectuals possessed in being able to disengage themselves from the endless oral necessity of *preserving* the past, which can only be accomplished by conflating it with the present. In this sense, it is a temporal conflation into which one's gods, or at the least one's ancestors qua spirits or divinities, must be incorporated. In a world that is exclusively mouth to ear to mouth to ear, to abandon one's spirits

¹⁰ This Lukács does in his riposte to Ernst Bloch, who spoke in favor of Surrealism as a revolutionary art form.

and ancestors narratively is to abandon one's past: "After all, when it is only through memory that a group's 'historical' existence can narratively survive, that group has no recourse but to preserve *all that has been with that which is now*" (Nayar 86). Indeed, we might contend (even if only tendentiously) that, via expunging or repudiating the spirit world in which so many people continue to believe and inject with hierophanic power, the Marxist literary tradition *refuses to acknowledge society in its totality*. (Keep in mind, as well, my previous suggestion that Marx's experiential relationship to highbrow literature might have had something of the opiate about it—or, in another turn of phrase, something itself tinged with the numinous.)

So, while Lukács may conclude that man's contemplative concentration on the past dangerously promotes ossification—as he says, "Only he who is willing and whose mission is to create the future can see the present in its concrete truth" (*History* 204)—the unlettered society or even individual would be ossified by recklessly fleeing the past, by not carefully and conservatively folding it *into* the present. For, it is only by these means that the collective self can be carried *into the future*. The realist storyteller may be for Lukács the one who "penetrates through the accidental phenomena of social life to disclose the essences or essentials of a condition, selecting and combining them into a total form and fleshing them out in concrete experience" (Eagleton 29); but if this *is* realism—and here we must face potentially painful facts—it is conceivably only the *lettered* storyteller's realism. Moreover, it is a realism that arguably delights in its own form of escape—from its past, its gods, its ancestral spirits. Such escape is only possible—or desirable, we might say—because the realist writer exists in a world that has a vast external apparatus already in place, one through which her phylogenetic past has long been archived and her ontogenetic past is archivable outside herself (as art or literature or this thing we call "history"; by way of desk calendars, Google, and Post-It Notes). In this way, ample space is generated for a lettered *fetishizing* of the past (whether through art or literature or this thing we call "history," in the form of first editions, archaeology, even library archives). Yes, here I could defensibly be accused of simplification; but I brave that possibility only because this is a perspective and a series of existential pressures too often marginalized, if not outright unacknowledged, by well-intentioned scholars.

If, as Eagleton says, the historical novel emerged as a genre in the early nineteenth century because writers were able "to grasp their own present as history" (29), such a development may have less to do with the revolutionary turbulence of the period than with the print-derived growth of, and commitment to, self-archiving—a practice, to amplify, which indeed emerges from the episteme-altering capacity to detach oneself from a requisite folding of the past into the present for the purposes of carrying *both* into the future. And could this extrication not in some sense, for the bourgeois reader, reflect an additional kind of relished atomization—a sense of oneself as "immortally" extricable from existence within the flow of history? Now, we can isolate the past: stand beside it, inspect it, critique it. No longer is it a part of ourselves. Now, it is a museum, a theater, a laboratory, a perennial "cold case" in wont of dissection. History in this realm is *privatized*.

Hence, when Lukács reacts so vehemently against formalism—that is, against those allegedly alienating worlds conjured by "avant-garde" prose writers like James Joyce and Franz Kafka—we need to accept that any experience of alienation is a case of *degrees*. For some parties, a realism stripped of excess (i.e., of melodrama, agonism, and a Manichean worldview) may *also*

prove alienating. True, Joyce's doorway may be comparatively narrower, such that his readers require, as Lukács purports, "a certain 'knack,' to see just what [his] game is" ("Realism" 57); but we need likewise assert that the major realists' entryways may be narrow, even if not as exclusively or constrictively as Joyce's.¹¹ After all, beyond the characteristics of excess mentioned above, realism's commitment to a non-amplified, non-telescoped, synchronic worldview additionally runs counter to epistemically oral predilections and exigencies (Nayar 61). In this way, Lukács's contention that the "broad mass of people can learn nothing from avant-garde literature" because such literature foists on its readers a "subjective attitude to life" (57) is tenable, to be sure. But when it comes to narrative, an attitude to life exists on an *epistemic sliding scale*. The projection of "reality and life" (57) so paramount for Lukács to the making of "good" realist novels may also, to reprise, prove a noetic, and even an ontological, stumbling block—at least insofar as such narrative demands *interpretation* from its readers: the need and desire for them to negotiate privately the meanings inherent in a text. This, alas, is a type of negotiation that problematically separates the individual from the group and, so, runs counter to the norms inherent in an oral way of knowing—yes, even in print literature, such as reflected in children's books and much sensational fiction, like those dime novels so popular prior to the advent of film. A more epistemically—and even existentially—oral worldview can persist in written texts, in other words, just as it can be imported into visual media, such as many an action-adventure or Hindi formula film.

Formalism may indeed alienate man from history by dissolving characters' mental states and reducing objectively reality to "unintelligible chaos" (Eagleton 31). However, history (as the lettered individual understands and conceptualizes that concept) may itself alienate or be anathema to audiences who seek an *attached* form of experience and relationship to time—that is, one *not* abstracted, open-ended, or intent on subverting the status quo, as can be the case vis-à-vis high-formalist works. (Engels at least, it need be said, grasped that the realist-qua-revolutionary fiction was intended for a relatively exclusive *reading* population. At least this seems to be case, in his positing that the politically partisan needed to "emerge unobtrusively" from dramatic situations in literature because only through such indirect means "could revolutionary fiction work effectively on the *bourgeois consciousness of its readers*" [qtd. in Eagleton 46, emphasis added].) Can we rightfully accept wholesale, then, Lukács' position that it is through the "mediation of realist literature" that "the soul of the masses is made receptive for an understanding of the great, progressive and democratic epochs of human history" ("Realism" 56)?

Against Rebelling Against the Status Quo

Lukács may have had (and still has) his supporters, but he was certainly not without his detractors, too. One of the latter was Bertolt Brecht, who accused Lukács of dogmatically and even nostalgically fetishizing nineteenth-century realism and, as a result of being so doctrinaire, of forever remaining blind to the best of that modernist art had to offer (Eagleton 53). (We might even propose alongside Brecht that Lukács was attempting to freeze the dialectical potentials of storytelling.) One of Brecht's more pointed points of contention with his contemporary concerned

¹¹ As for Kafka, Lukács felt him to be authorially flawed because the alienation he presented in his stories was so inescapable (Johnson 94). On the other hand, we might wonder how alienated, really, is the reader who is participating in Kafka's unresolved alienation and finding, in that author's expression of it, an existentially kindred spirit.

Lukács's consistent unwillingness to define the formalism he so vehemently and liberally rebuked. Brecht, as an artist and a man of the theater, felt a critic was obliged to enumerate formalism's parameters in careful and practical and, well, non-formalist terms: "If one wants to call everything that makes works of art unrealistic *formalism*, then—if there is to be any mutual understanding—one must not construct the concept of formalism in purely aesthetic terms" (71). Realism was not merely a question of form, maintained Brecht. After all, were we to emulate or replicate the realists, as Lukács appeared to be mandating, if we were to school ourselves in their methods and *style*, wouldn't that mean we were no longer acting as realists (82)?

Moreover, queried Brecht with justifiable vigor, why should literature be forbidden from employing "skills newly acquired by contemporary man, such as the capacity for simultaneous registration, bold abstraction, or swift combination" (75)? Certainly the novel did "not stand or fall by its 'characters,' let alone with characters of the type that existed in the 19th century" (77). Brecht, in other words, wanted to take advantage of every possible means of reaching "the broad masses" in order aggressively to enable them to become a "fighting people" (81). "We must not derive realism as such from particular existing works," he importuned (81)—especially works so obviously nested in the solitary reading of the privileged, individualized bourgeois public (Jameson, "Reflections" 200). Rather, we should "use every means, old and new, tried and untried, derived from art and derived from other sources, to render reality to men in a form they can master" (Brecht 81). Brecht was himself not averse to drawing upon the popular, as, to him, *popular* insinuated an art form "intelligible to the masses" (81). More broadly, *popular* implied "adopting and supplementing the masses' forms of expression, assuming their standpoint, confirming and correcting it"; it meant "representing the most progressive section of the people so that [that section] can assume leadership, and therefore intelligible [*sic*] to the other sections of the people as well" (81). For Brecht, *realism*, when cleansed of its multifarious, accreted meanings, meant

discovering the causal complexes of society, unmasking the prevailing view of things as the view of those who are in power, writing from the standpoint of the class which offers the broadest solutions for the pressing difficulties in which the human society is caught up, emphasizing the element of development, making possible the concrete and making possible abstraction from it. (82)

This, then, was the philosophical underpinning of his uniquely conceived experimental theater, which he labeled "epic" (though, now, it more often bears his name—as Brechtian theater). Central to Brecht's distinctive and innovative dramaturgy was *Verfremdung-seffekt*, an intentional "alienation effect" that stymied an audience's investiture in the passive "illusionism" and cathartic diversion considered typical of bourgeois theater (64). The latter sort of play does not stimulate audiences "to think constructively of *how* it is presenting its characters and events or how they might have been different," as Eagleton recounts of this more Aristotelian form of theater (64). "Because the dramatic illusion is a seamless whole which conceals the fact that it is *constructed*, it prevents an audience from *reflecting critically* on both the mode of representation and the actions represented" (64, emphasis added). In order to push a drama's spectators deliberately toward critical reflection, Brecht therefore fashioned plays that were emphatically discontinuous, episodic, and internally contradictory; not only that: they were radically open-ended and actors, instead of identifying with the roles they played, intentionally *distanced* themselves from their characters. For these reasons, Walter Benjamin—who was an advocate for changing the *productive apparatus*

of art and not merely art's content—heartily approved of Brecht's theatrical inventiveness (63-64), one where juxtaposition and didacticism pushed against the putative bourgeois pleasures of empathy and escape (65).¹² Such imposed estrangement from the goings-on on the stage, Brecht proposed, was the most effective means by which to induce in spectators a critical stance; a complex form of seeing housed not in gratification but in *speculation* (65).

Brecht's intentions of transforming the modes instead of merely the content are certainly admirable. Unfortunately, what the epistemically oral norms of narrative expose—and those, too, derived *ex post facto* from alphabetic literacy—is that modes and content are highly *interpenetrated*, such that altering the modes may unwittingly render the content less accessible to audiences like those very “broad masses” whom Brecht was estimably eager to reach. To be sure, were Brecht present (as he sometimes was) and in active conversation with his audience, he might be able to procure from them—at least in part—the sort of calling-into-question he eagerly, and indeed revolutionarily, sought. But imagine a theater where no such tutelage is either possible or the norm. Indeed, the more conventional mode of theatrical viewing (with audiences silently and even sacredly observing) is typical of the manner in which Brecht's plays are generally staged today—and primarily for bourgeois audiences, paradoxically enough. Alas, without Brecht present to encourage the impromptu conversations he wanted post-performance, spectators cannot possibly be guided toward the “correct” comprehension of any given play. And so, regrettably, we find ourselves at something of a cognitive impasse. For, so many of the attributes of Brecht's theatre—open-endedness; a refusal to capitulate to the status quo; the promotion of a revolutionary desire to overthrow the ruling class; and, most of all (what with Brecht no longer present to guide and tutor his audience), the demand for private critical negotiation of the discontinuous drama—are *negligible* apropos the oral episteme of narrative. As a result, the viewing of a Brechtian play conceivably becomes an exercise *about* Brecht—as a politically-motivated formalist, whose oeuvre is now the purview of art-house theatres and college classrooms.¹³

The absence from the oral episteme of the abovementioned attributes (e.g., the open-endedness, the demand for self-reflexive negotiation) is not without warrant. While Brecht's theater may conceive itself as “propaganda in favour of thinking” (Brecht, qtd. in Johnson 75), without a propagandistic “caller-into-question” present to force it, such thinking is of an unequivocally isolated nature. That is, the expectation is that the spectator involve himself in a lone, isolated, and esoteric (or etymologically “inner”) mining for meaning, and this, it turns out, is an expectation heavily tied to the legacy of chirography and print. Who outside the viewer able to relinquish “a single ready-made orientation to life,” as Goody and Watt phrase it (63), can afford noetically to *work* during a play—to form aggregations; to become, in a manner of speaking, accomplices with a protagonist; to enter that protagonist's mind (Nayar 120)? This is by no means a statement on such spectators' level of intelligence. Rather, oral individuals, as Walter Ong

¹² As one example, in the epilogue of *The Good Person of Szechwan* (1938-41), the audience is solicited by the main character to draw its own conclusions: “‘What is your answer? Nothing's been arranged. Should men be better? Should the world be changed?’” (qtd. in Johnson 78). In doing so, Brecht “endeavours to preclude an empathetic identification with the main character” (Johnson 78).

¹³ The same could certainly be argued of that most Brechtian of filmmakers, Jean Luc Godard. Said to be “the most brilliant and ambitious revolutionary artist of the last decade” (“Presentation II” 67), Godard via his films progressively displays an increasingly radical “political turn and ascesis not unlike that effected by Brecht's theatre in the thirties” (67). But his work, like Brecht's, is now often the purview of art-house cinephiles and college students taking courses on world cinema.

reminds us, assess intelligence as “situated in *operational* contexts,” and *not* “as extrapolated from contrived textbook quizzes” or other such expectations of abstract categorization (55, emphasis added).

With a certain unintended irony, the individual to discover these literacy-related pressures on cognitive processes was A.R. Luria, a social psychologist (and Marxist-Leninist) who, in 1931-1932, collected his observational materials during the Soviet Union’s radical restructuring (v). As his research bore out repeatedly, non-literate individuals—in this case, oral Uzbeki peasants—were firmly resistant to “disengaging [themselves] from immediate experience and formulating questions that [went] beyond it” (139). They even refused to make inferences from seemingly accessible syllogisms, no matter whether those syllogisms’ premises were nested in subjects connected to their own practical experience or not (107). To the highly oral individual, then, a Brechtian play might, as Ong describes in a different context, appear to little more than “some weird intellectual game” (51)—not to mention, a game without any situational utility whatsoever.

Even more, the desire to wrest a spectator from a cathartically satisfying and status quo-reinforcing ending may be anathema to the oral individual’s inclination for self-preservation—and here I mean self-preservation as an act of collective or social *reconciliation*. Modern psychologists might interpret such a desire for reconciliation as signal of “an anxiety before the danger of the new,” as Mircea Eliade worthily proposes, as a “refusal to assume responsibility for a genuine historical existence (93). However, the oral individual, as one would have to instruct those psychologists, does not refuse progress; it is more that such an individual desires to (and conceivably all-out must) safeguard the past by conflating it with the present. Hence the requirement for a harmonious ending, as that is how communal self-preservation is most efficaciously asserted (Nayar 88). (Indeed, how this need for such reassertion plays into the hands of any State or System crucially warrants, in my mind, future study by Marxists.)

What all this may point to is the intriguing manner in which alphabetic literacy-related norms have—in some sense, unwittingly—wended their way, or been imported, into playwriting, as well as into critical estimations regarding play-viewing and play-interpreting. That is, the phylogenetic legacy of reading and, even more, of *writing* has informed, mutated, and reshaped what theatrical experiences are, or what they can or even should be. And this is highly bound up with what the *novel* gave us, in its having predisposed us toward narrative retreat and isolation. In this sense, we are brought back to Walter Benjamin, who aptly discerned that what differentiates the novel from other forms of prose literature, such as the fairy tale or legend, is that the novel

neither comes from oral tradition nor goes into it. This distinguishes it from storytelling in particular. The storyteller takes what he learns from experience—his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale. The novelist has isolated himself. (“Storyteller” 79-80)

Still, even Benjamin’s observations mandate tweaking. For, as earlier we noted, there can indeed be modern storytelling forms, that surprisingly and innovatively work on the basis of the reticulate norms typically associated with oral tradition. Indeed, are not the contents of Benjamin’s later assertion that there “is nothing that commends a story to memory more effectively than the chaste compactness which precludes psychological analysis” (82) reflected time and again in those works

of literature which Marx would most certainly have deemed “lowbrow”—because of their absence of depth psychology, because of the more Manichean delineation of their characters as well as of the worlds those characters inhabit? *Their* “meaning of life,” in other words, may not constitute the *same* “meaning of life” which Benjamin argues “is really the center about which the novel moves” (87). Then again, Benjamin does follow up this declaration with the concession that the novel’s quest for life’s meaning is “the initial expression of perplexity with which its reader sees himself living this *written life*” (87, emphasis added). In this way, Benjamin acknowledges that the novel’s life is typically an alphabetically literate life, distinct from other sorts of lives which must resort to being spoken and to being heard—and spoken once more—and heard again—in a very different sort of production line of meaning.

Emboldening Marxist Literary Theory

Brecht was certainly correct when he argued that reality itself changes and, so, “in order to represent it, modes of representation must also change” (82). So, too, was Benjamin equally judicious in postulating that technical progress in literature transforms the *function* of art forms (“Conversations” 86).¹⁴ But, given the different ways of knowing that co-exist—and since these exist by *degrees*, they are not merely two distinctly oral and alphabetically literate ways of knowing, but multiple species of consciousness—what does that do to, or say about, any notion of “objective reality” vis-à-vis narrative? Here, I am subtly responding to Lukács’s proviso that, if literature is indeed “a particular form by means of which objective reality is reflected, then it becomes of crucial importance for [literature] to grasp that reality as it truly is, and not merely to confine itself to reproducing whatever manifests itself immediately and on the surface” (“Realism” 33). My staked claim is that, for too long now, the aesthetic controversies on the left have hinged on the rhetorical dialectic of realism contra subjectivity (not to mention, realism contra sensationalism) without conceding to how orality and alphabetic literacy may heavily inflect the *raisons d’être* of readers’ (and spectators’ and listeners’) choices. (The same could be said apropos the “high” contra the “low” when it comes to artistic genres, as well as, to an extent, the progressive contra the regressive [“Presentation II” 66].) We need, in other words, to add *another* dialectic to the already-extant and “crippled dialectic,” as it has been called, between the high and the low (66).

In no way am I advocating a kind of “technologism,” mind you, that is, a “belief that technical forces in themselves, rather than the place they occupy within a whole mode of production, are the determining factor in history” (Eagleton 74). (According to Eagleton, “Brecht and Benjamin sometimes fall into this trap” [74].) Any hermeneutic process is unavoidably nested in an individual’s oral-to-literate epistemic capacity to negotiate the world—and both are highly bound up with socio-economic forces, including the “privilege” one is allotted (or denied) in being inculcated through schooling into a literate way of knowing. No wonder, then, that Lukács himself felt compelled to grant that “it is still not unimportant to ask how much of the real literature of our time has reached the masses, and how deeply it has penetrated” (“Realism” 53). Cultural heritage does not, by virtue of the concept’s capitulation to *culture*, automatically render that heritage shared or accessible—or even in wont of access. Lukács may have ardently, and even admirably,

¹⁴ Brecht, however, disagreed with Benjamin on this point—or, rather, believed that Benjamin’s point about technical progress being “a criterion for judging the revolutionary function of literary works” applied “to artists of only one type, the writers of the upper bourgeoisie...” (Benjamin, “Conversations” 86).

believed that for an author “to possess a living relationship to the cultural heritage [means his] being *a son of the people, borne along the current of the people’s development*” (53-54). Nevertheless, self-identification with the proletariat and genuine political dedication to their cause through literature were—and remain—insufficient, as the oral episteme makes fairly patent.

And this returns us, even if only speculatively, to Marx.

Literature, for Marx, was not simply a mode of expression; it was also a significant marker of self-constitution (Eagleton 404). But such self-constitution, as we have seen, would not have been available to the thousands and even millions of the proletariat in his time. His was a particular kind of self-constitution, accessible and comprehensible because of his long-term dedication and devotion to the written word. Indeed, one might boldly, if perhaps a bit too psychoanalytically, wonder if his Marxism-as-praxis stemmed in part from an inchoate guilt he felt over the (cherished, indulged) alienation that literacy not only permitted but fostered in him. Certainly the introduction of these epistemes to the conversation helps explain why Marxist theories pertaining to aesthetics—at least, aesthetics insofar as they deal with narrative—have, more often than not, been “unable to offer a satisfactory explanation for the emancipatory capacity of the work of art” (Johnson 2). As Johnson explains, “An account of the enlightening potential of the art work must attempt to find the foundations within the recipient’s everyday consciousness for a new, emancipated way of thinking” (2). Or to cite Fredric Jameson, political praxis still remains “what Marxism is all about” (*Political* 299). But how to emancipate through decidedly literate means a recipient who may be ineluctably (or, possibly, voluntarily) beholden to an oral way of knowing? Thinkers like Lukács, like Brecht, like Marx, were often discriminating in favor of narratives that reflected not only their own philosophical and political interests, but also their capacities to deal with, say, unresolved ambiguity, irony, subjectivity, and the like—which are, in the realm of narrative, exclusive to the alphabetically literate episteme.

If anything, bringing orality and alphabetic literacy into the Marxist literary fold emboldens that discipline’s commitment to the belief that aesthetic phenomena must be “studied in a context of socio-historical processes, and in this way [be] regarded as part of a broad, ‘civilizational’ activity by which the species homo sapiens advances slowly to realize an innate potential” (Morawski 12). Literary works are not isolated phenomena; they are “mutually dependent with other cultural activity of predominantly social, political, moral, religious, or scientific character” (12). The legacy of the written word, and even more so of print, and of what these have made accessible, mutable, and even procreant, indubitably speak to the synchronic dynamism “transacted in a given moment of the constituted structure of society” and also, importantly, to the “diachronic dynamism, with the givens of the past being reconstituted by and affecting the present, and the future” (12).¹⁵ Perhaps it also gives Marx, ensconced in his armchair with *The Winter’s*

¹⁵ We might even propose that, when in their most extreme polarity, the oral and the literate epistemes act as genres of sort, in the sense that they, too, essentially reflect “contracts between a writer and his readers; or rather, ... they are literary institutions, which like other institutions of social life are based on tacit agreements or contracts” (Jameson, “Magical” 135). Certainly there is interesting work to be done concerning how oral-to-literate epistemic pressures that trans-historically weigh on narrative interpretation intersect with Jameson’s insistence that all narrative is “as an essentially allegorical act, which consists of rewriting a given text in terms of a particular interpretive master code” (*Political* 10). After all, it appears clear that anxieties and fantasies may manifest (or be read) very differently for individuals orbiting different ways of knowing—thus undermining any absolutist

Tale in his lap, some license to revel less guiltlessly—or perhaps more shamefacedly—in that stage play’s pleasures and to exclaim ecstatically, “What a boot is here with this exchange!”

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allegorical reading of a text. “Collective enunciation,” to borrow Deleuze and Guattari’s term (qtd. in Buchanan 70), need not apply to a single collective en masse.

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