could justly point to was the manifest incapacity (one might call it a stubborn, naive unwillingness) of the New Left to articulate its political aspirations with the mass organizations of the working class, namely, the existing Communist parties—a historic failure whose costs continue to accumulate.


**Literature Cited**


Some radical critics may have forgotten about Marxism; but Marxism, in the shape of Ahmad's devastating, courageously unfashionable critique, has not forgotten about them. [TERRY EAGLETON]

In a well-known passage, Marx powerfully urges us to do the impossible, namely, to think [the historical development of capitalism] positively and negatively all at once; ... to grasp the demonstrably baleful features of capitalism along with its extraordinary and liberating dynamism simultaneously within a single thought and without attenuating any of the force of either judgment ... The lapse from this austere dialectical imperative into the more comfortable stance of the taking of moral positions is inveterate and all too human: still, the urgency of the subject demands that we make at least some effort to think the cultural evolution of late capitalism dialectically, as catastrophe and progress all together. [FREDRIC JAMESON]

This essay is written for two distinct audiences for reasons concerning the nature of the book I address. I speak on the one hand to persons who are not familiar with the principles, methods, and history of left literary criticism and social theory. This is the audience most likely to be swayed by Ahmad's polemic and his way of situating and justifying it. At the same time, I tried to engage particular arguments in the book, bringing to bear in a procedural and integral way the general premises laid out in the early sections. Readers who are versed in these matters should go directly to page 133.

Source: *Public Culture*, vol. 6, 1993, pp. 97–132.
Any attempt at an intellectually serious response to Aijaz Ahmad’s *In Theory* must negotiate the author’s severely ungenerous treatment of other work in the field of postcolonial study. I say “negotiate” rather than the more straightforward “address” because I want to indicate the complexity of the matter and of its management. If treatment were roughly equivalent to tone or attitude, one could and probably should set it aside since these are features that solicit personal, moralistic, or aesthetic response, all of which foreclose on any real critical engagement. Moreover, when dealing with a work that consistently reduces the political to the ethical and the ethical to personal choice and “accountability” (6), one wants to give a wide berth to anything approaching imitative form. In the present instance, one wants to affirm Ahmad’s worthy emphasis on questions of mediation (5) and at the same time to show that materialist critique can frame those questions in more interesting, productive, and responsible ways than those demonstrated by Ahmad.

There is another deterrent to addressing the stridently partisan voice of this book. It seems important as a principle of radical critique that it tolerate within its ranks what William Blake called “honest indignation.” (The force of that phrase is measured by the difference between “honest” and “savage.”) Tactical considerations may compel the left to represent its differences with political conservatism in a restrained and equable way. All the more reason why, in its internal debates, oppositional discourse should feel free to enact its knowledge that the genial style normative within academic writing reflects the social contract of bourgeois liberalism. The agree-to-disagree subtext of such writing allegorizes the fiction of the free market, hosting the unregulated play of ideas because it is confident that the logic of social Darwinism will ensure the survival of the best ideas and the conservation of those elements from the losing positions that rational, public discourse has been able to incorporate and redeem.

At the same time, it is worth remembering that Marxist epistemology is historical through and through and in a uniquely dynamic way. Like relativism, Marxism disavows contemplative science, based as it is on the god’s-eye view. Unlike relativism, Marxism ties the objectivity of knowledge to the historical conditions of its production: the objective but noncategorical conditions of subjectivity. That dialectical turn, wrapping up truth and illusion, theory and practice, necessity and contingency, objects and subjects in a single, constitutively self-contradictory formation is Marxism’s decisive break with bourgeois science (empiricism, positivism, and sociologism) and, at the same time, its rejection of historicism, which relates knowledge to zeitgeist isomorphically, subjectivizing both. Following Sartre, “The Marxist historian does not have the concept of truth at his disposal” since “Marxism is an unveiling of being [today we would say, a production of knowledge] and at the same time, an unanswered question as to the validity of this unveiling.”

Marxist diatribe, therefore, runs a risky course. If its attack on the other is not complemented by a critique of the constitutive difference within its own identity – a critique that develops, moreover, in a substantive and integral way rather than as a set of demurrers or contextual qualifications – it forfeits its critical salient. Sartre’s “progressive-regressive method” outlines the process, of which Adorno is the exemplary practitioner. In raging at the identitarian thinking that tries to pass itself off as materialist critique, Adorno never fails to round back upon his own conclusions, pushing his method to search out the contradictions that at once realize and restrict those forms of truth. Hence, the endlessness and self-deepening character of his work, and the dramatized lesson that his critical purchase derives not from his doctrinal correctness, his visionary powers, or his social location but from a method that requires its own, *in situ* interrogation.

This issue – the extent to which the form of Ahmad’s critique keeps faith with the classical Marxism that he uses as a scourge against theory and the pseudoleft academics who countenance it – pinpoints the substance of my response. What Ahmad viliﬁes as “ambivalence,” “eclectic procedures,” “self-division,” and “Nietzschean nihilism” (effects endorsed, he argues, by the theoretical, culturalist, and textual turn in contemporary left criticism) is, I would argue, in many of the cases he cites, nothing more than a “properly Marxist” (64) and therefore practical awareness of the double logic of critique. If one is committed to the belief that in changing nature we change ourselves, then one is obliged to acknowledge that in the comparably transformative process of knowing the socially produced nature that is the object of our science, the knowing subject and his knowledge procedures also undergo change. To deny this is to reify our technologies of knowing and this in turn subjects us to them. The logic is familiar; in emptying our masteries of their dynamic and self-contradictory human content, in forgetting their determined historical provenance, we become dominated by them. Enlightenment reverts to myth.

This, the basic content of that Marxist humanism Ahmad seeks to restore, marks out the signal weaknesses of the book: (1) its failure to connect in a nontrivial way mental to material production; (2) its failure to distinguish logical from dialectical contradiction and to grasp the latter as the condition of knowledge, not its antithesis; and (3) its failure to observe the reflexivity definitive of Marxist critique. By “reflexivity,” I do not mean philosophical self-inspection, elitist self-hatred, sociological stocktaking, or dark lamentations about the inevitable guiltiness of knowing. Rather, I intend the specific and practical awareness that materialism, unlike other explanatory models, must remain provisional. Raymond Williams, the single Marxist critic favorably cited by Ahmad anywhere in this book, argues that position very strongly. In his essay, “Problems of Materialism,” he insists on a “re-examination” of the received formulations of historical materialism itself, as at once historically limited and insufficiently materialist.

The ungenerous quality so pronounced in *In Theory* is, in the main, the sign of these failures. In saying that, I do not deny the presence of a good deal of gratuitous nastiness (e.g., “Said does not talk about the substance of Guha’s book, and it remains unclear whether he has actually read it” [208–9]) and, throughout, a hairshirt attitudinizing that is either offensive or pitifully puerile,
depending on your perspective ("... it is only a fundamental acceptance of a Marxist position, with all its consequences, which entails an unbearable self-denial" [219]). These are matters of tone, however, and as I said, are best left to discredit themselves.

What interests me is the hostility that functions as the formal signature of the exercise, marking it as harangue, jeremiad, flyting, ethnic cleansing: not to make a mystery of it, jihad. It is in this context that one observes not only the insult to every familiar name in the field of study but also the failure, throughout the body of this long book, to introduce a single ally in the project that is launched.7 (Gayatri Spivak is perhaps the most conspicuous by her absence.) The argument is, as one says, an intervention, and its way of intervening is both integral to its aim and tantamount to its construction of its own identity. The main business of this book is to remap the field of postcolonial critique so that it may situate itself in a special, heretofore unnamed place and claim for that place an authority (synonymous, in this book, with authenticity) more compelling than that of any other spot on the map. Ahmad says that, unlike Edward Said, he is "not very keen on the matter of originality" (174), which makes his claim to a solitary occupation of this hallowed place all the more interesting.

In light of these matters, I will respond to the kind and quality of the assault mounted by this book. I do so, however, in a register different from that which the book adopts. My choice of that register is a substantive factor in my response. Rather than examine Ahmad's argument piecemeal and within the book's own terms of debate, I question Ahmad's conclusions by reference to the specific procedures and the general form of the argument. I take up these matters first in terms of the Marxist problematic. Does Ahmad in fact follow through on his claim to a rigorously Marxist analytic? Second, I try to assess the practical results of Ahmad's commitments. Sandwiched between his assault on Fredric Jameson and Said and smack at the center of the book is a reading of Salman Rushdie's Shame — by its position, one surmises, a set-piece demonstration of the advantages secured by a strictly Marxist hermeneutic.

On page 127, Ahmad promises to read the novel by a set of questions that could not materialize within the category of a "dominant postmodernism," questions that could not be asked by "the modern metropolitan bourgeoisie." I will ask what these questions and this reading can do that could not have been done before in the way of elucidating the form of the novel and its ideological inscriptions and material determinants.

My focus on form is also determined by the performative design of the book. Ahmad constructs the argument as a Marxist shibboleth, keyed to separate the faithful from the apostates. To emphasize procedural questions is to refuse the binary terms of Ahmad's test. [For example, textual culture/activist culture, the academy/the trade union and political party, eclectic/pure, entitled/exploited, choice/compulsion, decadence/virtue, there [the effete West]/here [struggling-toward-socialism in New Delhi].] My emphasis traces to a different version of Marx, which I take to be the more definitive and durable strain and also the one that is proof against sectarian appropriation: not a set of themes, plots, actors, and moral stances, but a model of the relation between theory and practice, or between those two composite practices of knowing and doing. Marx's argument for the historical dialecticity of this relationship is what prevents that particular species of materialism from becoming a dogma. Rather than defend the large, varied, and powerful body of work reviled by Ahmad, a discourse that capably speaks for itself, I answer his polemic on a ground he would seem committed to respecting: namely, Marxism's epistemic standpoint. The aim is not to contest Ahmad's conclusions but to question the terms that support them, and to do so by reference to the Marxism Ahmad uses to upbraid the many who have defected from the straight and narrow of a revolutionary practice. The idea is to bracket the move that organizes this book and to suggest that that kind of move will always get outflanked. For all its piety about classical Marxism, Ahmad's is a shallow and reactive affair. The piety is what gives the game away.

In Theory constitutes its own identity by exclusionary processes even as it rails against the Manichaeism of those against whom it defines itself. It is an ugly book, accusing everyone of selling out and of doing so for the most venal and careerist of reasons.

There is that within this book, however, which is at first blush enormously attractive. It usefully reminds us that "the central proble[m] of Marxist cultural historiography" is "the determinate set of mediations which connect the cultural productions of a period with other kinds of productions and political processes." (5). Ahmad clearly has the resources to search out the dynamic, complexly reciprocal relations between, on the one hand, emergent technologies and social forms within scientific and general production, and, on the other, the political and cultural formations that mediate knowledge production and identity politics in a world whose micro- and macrosystems, regimes, or logics seem tendentially or actually poststructural. This is the sort of inquiry launched by Benjamin in the essay on mechanical reproduction and the monograph on baroque allegory. In our own time, it is exemplified by Donna Haraway's radical rewriting of such familiar left binaries as identity and nonidentity, first and second nature, species being and technology, autonomy and heteronomy.6 Haraway's work on those categorical terms, pursued through a new kind of critical writing, is prompted by an awareness that "the profligate new expansion of multinational capital [has] end[ed] up penetrating and colonizing those very precapitalist enclaves (Nature and the Unconscious) which offered extraterritorial and Archimedean footholds for critical effectivity."9

One also encounters this concretely reflexive approach to mediation in the work of Michael Taussig, where it yields a parallax vision of the social production of reality and the reality of social appearance.10 The two incomensurable knowledges jostle and interrupt each other, but neither one is cast as the truth or the transformer of the other. Their relationship mimics the workings of the nervous system, Taussig's metaphor for the exquisitely responsive but nonabsorptive and homeostatic tendencies of late capital. Taussig and
Jameson's binarism could be read as the reaction to a failed identification: a whether, or how, a dialectically historical materialism can remain a histori­

Ahmad correctly praises Williams. Ahmad, like Haraway and Taussig, seems "rethinking [of] the existing categories of [their] own thought" (49) for which

Ahmad plays the part of the solitary (and to be sure, suffering) intellectual, the author-original, engendering his universe of discourse, meaning, and value ex nihilo (or, by reference only to the departed greats, and only three of them: Marx, Williams, and D. D. Kosambi, "a polyglot scholar and a distinguished scientist who held the Chair of Mathematics at the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research for sixteen years" [283]).

Jameson's work permits us to see the commodification of critique (inevitable within the economic and social realities of the late twentieth century) as a development consistent with Marx's vision of the increasingly totalizing tendencies of capitalism and thus, by the same token, as consistent with the emergence of revolutionary energies. He lets us see that the question of whether the postmodern is a conservative or a critical phenomenon cannot be decided abstractly or in the binary terms provided by dominant culture. (And this holds true, e.g., for the emergence of allegory as a representational dominant in non-Western narrative.) The postmodern, like national allegory, is both conservative and critical, in the manner of, for example, the romantic symbol, nineteenth-century realism, the destruction of aura in an age of mechanical reproduction, and, an item from a different set, the emergence of the bourgeoisie. Or, one could say, borrowing the phrase Homi Bhabha takes from Lacan, these developments are both critical and conservative, and neither — neither the One nor the Other.14 The location rejects the dyadically defined closures of those two sites (Master and Slave), designating as the properly critical space precisely that excluded middle banished by classical logic and its either-or's, a position that Hegel's dialectic restored. It describes what Taussig has named the zone of "epistemic muck," that "silly if not desperate place between the real and the really made-up ... where most of us spend most of our time as ... socially created, and occasionally creative beings."15

This break with analytic reason (which is based on a model of identity that, as Hegel showed, is either tautology [A is A] or mechanical self-contradiction [A is ̄] is nowhere in Marx repudiated or inverted. It is for him, as for Hegel, that which secures the objectivity of his system. It is the device that renders the system's dynamism immanent to it, and its development, therefore, independent of both metaphysical causes and moral agents — gods and heroes. To formulate identity in terms of nonidentity (A is "not-A-in-A"); the bourgeoisie is the bourgeoisie-as-negated-by-the-proletariat-which-it-engenders-in-the-process-of-its-self-realization) is to renounce the Archimedean place to stand.

This is one self-denial that Ahmad, for all his asceticism, refuses. His habit is rather to externalize and vilify. He blames the absorption of radical critique on "theory," conceived as a double agent for the capitalist state, a mole burrowed
Ahmad, who robes himself in the mantle of Marx, produces what amounts to a binary, moralistic, transcendental critique, exhibiting the combination of subjectivism and scientism of which Marx accused Feuerbach, whose non-dialectical ideology critique he offered as an example of the bourgeois idealism so deeply inscribed in the practice of Enlightenment reason, however cynical. Ahmad harshly denounces work that seeks to articulate changes in subjectivity and political agency entailed by changes in concrete social situations and modes of production, general and scientific. He brands all such work as a deeply bourgeois, “reactionary anti-humanistic” “irrationalism” (164, 168, 192, 54). To this vicious newfangledness, he opposes a “properly Marxist political [and] literary culture” (64), a gesture that sets him worlds apart from the Williams whom he admiringly cites. Critique of the subject, characterized by In Theory as an excrecence upon the body of Marxist objectivism, is entirely consistent with, even prescribed by a Marxist analytic. What is the critique of bourgeois individualism if not an exposure of the determined constructedness of that naturalized subject form? Why should the effort to rethink the unified, male, class subject engendered by nineteenth-century industrial capitalism for a world increasingly defined by small-scale, rapid response, mobile, skill-based rather than capital-intensive manufacture, much of it performed in the home, piecemeal, by women and Asians, destined for assembly and sale elsewhere—why should that effort fall outside ideology critique?

By the same token, why should Marxist literary studies be barred from work on the medium of critical representation, work that challenges through both its form and content the false universalism and the transparency of the premises on which classically empirical historiography is based? On this subject, I quote from Terry Eagleton, a critic who would seem to figure for Ahmad (given his respect for Williams and in light of some rather marked borrowings [see n. 23]) a standard within materialist criticism. (Throughout this review, and for that reason, I use Eagleton to interrogate both the consistency and the value of the program Ahmad launches.) Eagleton opens his review of Black Literature and Literary Theory by observing, “It is sometimes claimed that modern literary theory is an impossibly esoteric affair, offensively elitist in its bar­barous jargon. The truth is that such theory has always been more acceptable to the ruled than to the rulers. Oppressed peoples are … skilled by hard schooling in the necessity of interpreting their oppressor’s language … [O]nly those who run the system can afford the luxury of believing [that total] systems do not exist.”18 Theory so conceived, or theory in the service of putting the skids on a failing institution rather than refurbishing it, “tends to arise when a traditional intellectual practice has come unstuck and is therefore forced into radical self-reflection.” This is, arguably, less of a crisis state than a desideratum for work in the human sciences. (Or, it is both.) Rather than rush to foreclose this practical inquiry into the discursive mechanisms of knowing, materialist as well as idealist, one might want to extend it. Much of the work that is airtily or viciously dismissed by In Theory did exactly that, making strongly revisionary contributions to Marxist literary study. This work succeeded in "undermin[ing]
[a] whole way of doing things" and showed countless students of culture how to "try something entirely different" without at the same time promoting that difference as itself proof against historical contestation.19

When Marxist polemic keeps faith with the materialist paradigm, it does so by trying to objectify and factor into its field of inquiry its own contradictions, activating them to challenge and, ideally, negate the positivities produced by the reading.20 This restlessness and interminability signify an embodied understanding of knowledge as a process of social production, not, that is, a matter of fixed positions, the possession of enlightening facts, and "strict partisanship in the politics of theory" (70). Ahmad's title, In Theory, betrays his departure from this model, announcing as it does a place outside theory, released from the dreary incumbency to "problematicize" that hampers Western intellectual activism, free of that entoiled relation to/within dominant culture that postcolonial study suffers. This safety zone has no reality within the terms of any Marxist science, strict or loose. To propose such a place is, in addition, sharply inconsistent with Ahmad's attack on the alleged scholasticism of Jameson's three-world distinction. According to Ahmad, this distinction is at odds with the realities of transnational capitalism, characterized by "vastly novel restructurings of global capitalist investments, communication systems and information networks - not to speak of actual travelling facilities ..." (129). If there are not, as he says, "three worlds but ... one" (103), where is that "non-Western" but not Third World (i.e., not hegemonically constituted) place, that scene of instruction, island of history, and place of "belonging" from which In Theory arises?

What is typically in Jameson and could well have been here a fruitful contradiction — an immanent, historically necessary tension that, if staged, reflected, and woven into the analytic, might have accomplished the political reorientation Ahmad seeks to effect — is instead something on the order of a symptom: a defense formation that with a predictable perversity reproduces the very wish it denies. The wish, projected onto Jameson and Said, is to shore up a frighteningly complex, ambivalent, heterogeneous, and labile political identity by opposing to it a demonized other. This repetition in a very specific way vitiates the critique of theory and also the reading of Rushdie's Shame, a performance that is staged as an example of the practical payoff of the general argument. As I have said, it produces gross discrepancies between the rigorous Marxism Ahmad claims for himself and the actual procedures and conclusions of this argument. It also engenders internal inconsistencies, centering on the attacks of Jameson and Said. While Jameson is rebuked for finding nationalism everywhere in the Third World, and finding it a liberatory and solidary tendency, Said is attacked for detecting a critique of nationalism everywhere, and for interpreting that operation as liberatory and empowering. Jameson errs by sentimentally primitivizing non-Western literary production, Said by postmodernizing it. Or so the argument runs: not explicitly, however, for that might foreground the schematism of Ahmad's own reading of Jameson and Said. Worse, the exposure of that simple inversion might call the question on Ahmad's own position. I refer to his geopolitical site (New Brunswick [Rutgers]? New Delhi [Centre for Contemporary Studies; Nehru Memorial Museum and Library]? of contemporary studies and to the matter of Ahmad's political and rhetorical stance. For whom and to what end does he write: a metropolitan left-intelligentsia whose totalizing view of non-Western cultural production needs to be broken up into diverse and logically incompatible narratives and analyses; or, non-Western, nonacademic, and strictly local audiences, whose resistance politics are best served by a discourse of themselves as a collective, revolutionary subject, a national constituency. Moreover, the mythic (more precisely, Oedipal) nature of the ostensibly analytic operation might emerge too plainly were Ahmad to present his reduction of Jameson and Said into a single but Janus-faced figure of repression. Ahmad's perfect devotion to the standard set by Kosambi, a name he must situate, characterize, and celebrate for the Western reader, could very well look like a strategy for securing influence without anxiety: a solution of sorts to the Oedipal bind. More narrowly, Ahmad's rejection of the compromised, fashionable element in Jameson and Said, were it to be thematized, might raise questions about the provenance of Ahmad's brand of Marxism, the model for which seems to be Kosambi's economistic reflection theory (283). Why should a method appropriate for a scientist working on textual and archival problems in the 1940s and 1950s be the paradigm of choice today?

Ultimately, Ahmad's tirades against ambivalence and aestheticism in the work of others and his determined suppression of it in his own work lead to an arid, impoverished, and retrograde hermeneutic. "Retrograde" is not a euphemism for unanalytical or passe; it means in this context, reductively thematic and sexist. This hermeneutic, moreover, emerges in an apparent indifference to the rich and extensive discourse on ideology as something more than and different from false consciousness. These are the topics I take up below. Before beginning, however, let me make a few general remarks surrounding the question of hermeneutics.

As I have said, what I chiefly address in these remarks is the form of Ahmad's critique. The great watershed in Marxist aesthetics and theory of culture, prepared by Lukacs and Goldmann and realized by Williams, Althusser, Jameson, Eagleton, and Macherey, consisted in the demonstration that it is the representational form of the artwork, not its mimetic or doctrinal themes, that constitutes the privileged locus of Marxist analysis. (This break with content analysis and reflection theory paralleled structuralism's description of the relation between signifier and signified within a given language system as semiotically determinative and complexly, indirectly related to the referent outside it, often in constitutive ways.) According to this, revisionary view of cultural reflection, the ideological content of the artwork is its form, and form is a name for the work's mode of reproducing the ratios that construct given and made, nature and culture, matter and meaning in its particular social formation. These ratios are seen to operate preconsciously: indeed, often, to construct consciousness and the self-consciousness that seizes it. The form of the
artwork is its way of figuring fact and value and the relation between the two; it is also the work's self-representation as a particular kind of fact and value, namely, art, knowledge, "culture."

What one looks for in the work of art is not an "absolute veracity" but "a veracity made true by the historic significance of its mode of idealisation." The working assumption is that no discourse escapes ideology. There is no cultural product that does not in one way or another idealize its facts of life in the very process of articulating them. (This is what is meant by "representation" in the large sense in which that word is used today, not a process subsequent to cognition, not a public, performative act following on the private, mental one, but rather the social constitution of that experientially private place and of the knowing that occurs there.) Those different ways of idealizing (not, in this context, an evaluative verb but one that denotes generalizing, essentializing, displacing, naturalizing effects) are the topic of a materialist reading. To claim for any work, style, genre, location, or author an exemption from that law is deeply to misunderstand the Marxist position: "[A]rt is inevitably part of that which is and only as part of that which is does it speak against that which is." It speaks "against" indirectly, through the relation between its peculiar organization and the formal and dynamic laws of the social whole to which it belongs, an order of things more resistant to analysis or even detection than the aesthetic design. The resonance between the two may flush out from the "unreflected mystified reality" its social horizons.

The power that Althusser, for example, attributes to art is that of throwing into relief the contradictions that occur in a naturalized and embodied way elsewhere in society, disturbing the closure without which ideology cannot function. That is the most that a Marxist aesthetic can claim for the work of art and still remain within the epistemological field of Marxism. In the form of the discourse (its way of producing its thematics and polemics), those processes of mediation that deliver up the real as such, and that segment of it called the "self," do their work. By the real "as such," I mean the field of meaning and value that counts for particular groups as the material truth of their lives, their given conditions of existence. (I do not mean, decidedly, that sociological aggregate of abstract data that Ahmad serves up as reality.)

If this is by now a truism of Marxist literary analysis, then it should hold as well for intramural critical debate. (I can think of no very good reason, and certainly no a priori one, why the discourse of knowledge should enjoy a clearer, more objective view of its moment's determining orders and hegemonies or a richer store of countercultural options than the aesthetic discourses.) Ahmad's understanding of literary form discourages attention to the formal dimension of his own writing. In one telling sentence, he equates form with allegory, epic, and fairy tale (124), treating these as categorical imperatives, their ideological content fixed and determinate, rather than as irreducibly concrete social practices of reading and writing. In a stunningly wrongheaded set of moves, for example, Ahmad argues the condensation of Jameson's allegorical reading of Third World literature, taking his concept of allegory from, of all places, romanticism's notoriously tendentious dichotomizing of symbolic and allegorical modes. This, moreover, in the face of Jameson's explicit allusion to the revisionary reading of allegory developed by Benjamin and "now experiencing a remarkable reawakening of interest in contemporary literary theory." This kind of allegory is the narrative trope for a social reality characterized by discontinuity and dislocation, where it is things and signs that live, move, and have their being while humanity and its social life are frozen and thingified. In such a world (the world famously conjured by Marx in his description of the fetish), the real, social relation between humanity and its things, and between things and their meanings, has all the arbitrariness, overdetermination, and eroticism of baroque allegory, a form that has become, within materialist critique, a synonym for nonmetaphysical, nontotalizing, antinaturalizing representation. Eagleton, whose words endorse this book, has written what is perhaps the most trenchant appraisal of Benjamin's reflections on the Trauerspiel, its "displa[y] of the dual structure of the commodity, which atomizes Nature to abstract equivalents only to recharge each fragment with a kind of grisly caricature of the magical 'aura' it has driven from social production in general." In allegory, the commodity's self-contradictory form stands revealed; the form, thus, puts paid to the wishful fusions, the denials and aesthetic displacements inscribed in the romantic symbol.

To make that comparison, however, is also to gauge Ahmad's ignorance of the relation between romanticism's feverish brief for the symbol, recycled unchanged here, and the emergent reality of commodity production and its social implications in the early nineteenth century. Again, it is Eagleton who, among others, articulates the twofold conservative and critical salients of romantic organicism, the aesthetic that generates the symbol as such. On the one hand, a revolutionary poetics of unalienated production and, on the other, the negative knowledge of the actual conditions of early nineteenth-century social and economic life: a repression. The symbol, constructed antinormally against a strawman version of allegory (an organic/mechanical binary), operates the wish to transcend the material interests and purposes that set society and the individual at odds and that pit the individual - her different wishes, histories, affinities - against herself. The critical force of the symbol is inseparable from its reproduction of the hegemonic norm, in this case, the division of labor that separates art from everyday life and that valorizes art by reference to its disinterest, a function of its remove from all worldly domains. That detachment, analogous to Ahmad's own claim to a virtuous distance from the interests that drive Western intellectual radicalism, is perhaps what explains his uncritical and ahistorical brief for the symbol as the trope of revolutionary utopianism.

In light of what amounts to Ahmad's fundamentalist position on questions of representation (e.g., his commitment to content analysis in reading, realism in literature, and nonreflexivity in materialist critique), it seems useful to broach more explicitly (1) the question of the relation between fact and theory and (2) the role of contradiction in knowing.
As I have said, what Ahmad stigmatises as “theory” is the process to which Sartre alludes in the statement quoted above: the asking of presently unanswered questions concerning the validity of one’s knowledge procedures, procedures given in ways one can never fully know because they are given by one’s class, race, gender, group, nationality, moment, and the many combinations thereof that determine subjectivity. Theory, thus conceived, is the abstract class term for historical self-reflection undertaken within concrete circumstances and in specific ways. It is not independent of or ancillary to the exercise of cultural analysis but more like its material foundation. Theory is a calling of attention to the unavoidable but always historically specific and always telling contradictions embodied and engendered in acts of knowing, in science.

Here, by way of contrast, is Ahmad’s view of theory: “Facts require explanations, and all explanations, even bad ones, presume a configuration of concepts, which we provisionally call ‘theory.’ In other words, theory is not simply a desirable but a necessary relation between facts and their explanations” (34). The definition betrays what I have called Ahmad’s sociological, positivist, pre-critical concept of fact. An instance: he explains the wave of academic radicalism in the United States today as a reflex denial of the failure of sixties new left politics and a displacement of political into textual culture. One wonders how this account improves on the by now standardly derivative example of psychology: wherein sixties activism is explained by the postwar switch from breast to bottle-feeding.

What is signally forgotten in both cases is that “the concrete is concrete because it is a synthesis of many particular determinants, i.e., a unity of diverse elements.” That of course is Marx, famously quoted by Lukács, and the wording and context of both the original and quoted version strongly distinguish synthesis from aggregate, and determinants from unreflected data. To say that facts are interpretations — situated, practical, and value laden — is not to indulge in “shallow pathos about the impossibility of truthful human communication,” nor is it to do away with the concept of truth itself (194). It is very much, however, to question the “facticity of facts,” if, by that phrase, Ahmad means their transparency, objectivity, and absoluteness. It is to recognize that the truth is always “a” truth, or, “truths”; it is always a version, but also, since there is no such thing as a mastering, metaphysical form of truth, the version is in no way an epistemically or optically weak term. It is to allow that some versions have more authority in certain contexts than others, that this is not in any simple sense a pragmatic determination, and that what counts as a fact for one version may not for another. A fact is a socially mediated construction from a certain point of view of what happened or what is, just as the event or the reality is determined in various and variable ways by that construction. And, because facts are not transparent, because they are already socially produced explanations, they must, if they are to recover their objectivity, be detoured through another set of syntheses, another nontransparency. Unless they are so produced, they remain abstractions masquerading as particulars. One such detour, the relevant one for Ahmad, would reorganize that data by way of Marxist theory, which includes its internal critiques. The logic is familiar: one negates the negation secreted in the data themselves. The process realizes those facts in the very act of surpassing them.

The rage against theory (synonymized, revealingly, with abomination, contamination, and eclecticism) underlines the central contradiction of the book, mentioned above. If, as Ahmad argues, there is no such thing as the Third World, no place that is not in some fashion occupied by the formations and tendencies of advanced capital and therefore no otherness that is not a self-serving fiction of the colonial and theorizing imagination, then in what consists the distance and difference that consecrate Ahmad’s own practice? Why should the “day to day drudgeries of, say, a political party or trade union,” — “say,” the credentials of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century industrial male labor — provide an epistemic edge over the drudgeries of day-to-day life in other social and professional formations? “There is right here, within the belly of the First World’s global postmodernism, a veritable Third World, perhaps two or three of them” (122). Or, from the other side, why should the decision to write from an institutional site in the first world disqualify the work of Said et al? If, in line with the premises of Marxist thought, a possible knowledge of X is produced by the same conditions that give rise to X (e.g., revolutionary class consciousness produced by the dehumanizing conditions of industrial manufacture, conditions that also produce the class as such), then what sense is there to restricting bona fide knowledge of the West and its practices (a West that is, by Ahmad’s own account, everywhere land nowhere) to a place and set of conditions outside it and untouched by the contradictions that structure it? What, in short, are the objective conditions of the truth-value Ahmad claims for his work and his work alone?

These are questions solicited by Ahmad’s argument but they are also unanswered within the terms of that argument. He paints himself into a corner. To disguise this, he accuses others of faults that define his own practice. I refer in this context to his observation that oppositional criticism makes the mistake of taking its terms of debate from the right (65). Ahmad’s assertion of logical consistency and political purity represents just such an error. It puts him in a position indefensible for a Marxist critic. The actual and paradoxically legitimating relation between liberatory criticism and determining orders is that of dynamic and self-contradictory embeddedness: the critic is formed by conditions pertaining to dominant class structures and relations and what subtends and/or extends them at the level of economic and cultural production, if that distinction can be allowed. In this, the critic is like everyone and everything else in his world. The contradictions of those structures and relations, and between them and what serves as that culture’s base, occupy the critic and shape her practice in such a way as to produce illuminations of her world exceeding her knowledge of it. Consciousness is always consciousness of material and ideological practice, and to imagine it as something prior to or formally independent of that content is sheer idealism. Similarly, the premise
of distance from the corrupting metropolitan seats of power, and of voluntary withdrawal from the circuits of power within one’s own world, cannot be sustained within the terms of a Marxist analysis. Within that explanatory paradigm, it would be the reproduction of contradictions (generated elsewhere in the culture) within the critical act, in a way permitting a degree of reflection not afforded by other practices (where either surveillance is more systematic and instantaneous or naturalization through ideology more complete), that establishes the radical potential of critique. What Bhabha calls the “space of translation” is no more than the displacing of contradictions from one sphere of production to another — recoding them and, in the process, precipitating out their logical character as contradiction, making it cognitively available.

Of course this place, this translation will at some point become domesticated. As Williams observed, once oppositional forms are made available, they become part of the corporate organization. The “possibility of opposition, and of its articulation … depends on very precise social and political forces … subject to historical variation.” This is not to say, however, that only some oppositional forms, produced in certain locations, are authentic, honest, rigorous. (Nor can I think of a statement by Marx to the effect that certain moments within the development of capitalism or certain bourgeois formations preclude absolutely and in all sectors a critically transformative understanding.) It is only to emphasize that one job of historical criticism is to study the different potentials entailed by different situations, not to indulge in moralizing and self-aggrandizing rebuke. In this vein, and also by way of assisting the dismantling of the old base-superstructure model, Williams sets out the two principal forms of materialist analysis, the epochal and the historical. The distinction, which revolves around totality and its relation to historical conditions, helps to define Jameson’s and Said’s practices — epochal analyses, both — from Ahmad’s empiricist attack. If it is true that, as Ahmad avers, “we live not in three worlds but in one” (103), then the epochal critique, with its reflection of the total form of historical experience, could be at this stage the more transformative.

I want to pretend that we can separate means from end in order to ask what is achieved in the reading of Rushdie’s Shame. More specifically, what is achieved that could not emerge from the postcolonial analytics rejected by Ahmad.

Ahmad frames his reading by arguing the complementarity of modernism and postmodernism, the one positing a canon, replete with etiquettes of reading, and the other a countercanon, with its equal and not so opposite etiquettes. The substantive identity of the two poetics resides in their rejection of realism as a mode of literary production and reception and their contempt for those realist works that were in their own time or are presently popular and influential. Ahmad accuses “Colonial Discourse Analysis” (his scare quotes and caps) of subjecting the robust realism of many non-Western works to “postmodernist etiquettes of reading” (125). It is against this hegemony that Ahmad intervenes.

There is, however, one signal exception to this rule, and it is Fred Jameson, who, Ahmad confesses, “occupies a different and distinctive position in all this” (125). Jameson’s reading of Third World literature looms so large in this book and plays so paradigmatic a role as to strike empty Ahmad’s argument for a “tie between postmodernism and Third-Worldist canonizations,” the work, he says, of the “metropolitan critical avant-garde” (125). Jameson, who is, in this book, exemplary of that class, not only celebrates the realism he finds within Third World cultural production, he reads it as consistent with the emancipatory energies of the countries in question.

As one move in his campaign against modernism and postmodernism, Ahmad isolates the “universalism” of these poetics, by which he means their ransacking of the world’s cultures and histories in search of materials to commodify on the Western market. The modernist masterpiece represents, by this view, a collection of cultural fragments, prised from their founding contexts and profitably offered up as abstract equivalences to the metropolitan audience. Ahmad acknowledges that this “idea of the availability of all cultures … for consumption by an individual consciousness was, of course, a much older European idea, growing in tandem with the history of colonialism as such.” It is, he says, the “perfection and extended use of it in the very fabrication of modernism … [that] signalled a real shift …” (128).

That last phrase, “perfection and extended use,” is all that stands between Alexander Pope’s description of Belinda’s dressing table in “The Rape of the Lock” (1717) and Ezra Pound’s Cantos (1917-59). In her revisionist reading of Pope, Laura Brown builds on the findings of Louis Landa’s important essay, “Pope’s Belinda, the General Emporie of the World, and the Wondrous Worm.” Brown reads in “The Rape” — in its “very fabrication” of Belinda and the aesthetic, the coterminus heroes of this quintessentially Augustan poem — a poetics of empire. Pope gathers the wealth of the world for the adornment of his heroine, who, in her person, sublimes it into art, an art that both imitates the imperial adventure and surpasses it. Since Ahmad virtually defines modernism and its sequel, the postmodern, by this representational practice, one would like to know how the commercial violence at work in Pope’s poem (and the poem’s way of transvaluing and sexualizing it) differs from that of T. S. Eliot’s The Waste Land or his “Gerontion.” The technical and quantitative difference alone (“perfection and extended use”) will not support the argument, nor will the mere citing of the existence of supermarkets (see Ahmad, 128), a feature of the twentieth-century scene, establish a critical difference. It would seem important for a Marxist critic who tilts against the reductive schematism of contemporary left criticism to establish with as much historical precision as possible the textual and contextual differences between a work written in the early part of the eighteenth century and works produced throughout the twentieth century.

The lack of historical and ideological specificity is less of a problem than Ahmad’s indifference to the critical potential contained in the high modernist aesthetic. I refer to the fact that the nonsystematic, cross-cultural, and categorically transgressive juxtapositions found in The Waste Land and Pound’s Cantos effectively highlight divisions and distinctions that normally keep the various
but interrelated interests, oppressions, and contradictions of capitalist cultures out of view. Or, to adapt Ahmad’s example, the supermarket at least permits us to think about the material and cultural processes that bring coffee from Indonesia to a shelf in Ann Arbor that contains peppers from Chile and tomatoes from the San Joaquin valley. The “universalism” of the modernist poetic threatens the commodity form by its very heterogeneity and nonsystematicity, effects that nudge the labor histories and social contexts of the appropriated elements toward visibility. The project of *The Waste Land* is of course to resolve these differences (and dissolve the contradictions they encode) at the level of individual consciousness and of art or to reveal them as either inconsequential or apparitional. Nevertheless, to achieve these ends, and to valorize that achievement, the poem must first present these differences, present them as a problem, and present the problem as formidable enough to be worth solving. In this winner-loses logic, *The Waste Land* and “The Rape” are alike. Belinda’s charm, shown to depend on tortoise shell from Africa, ivory from Asia, silk from China, and tea from Ceylon, enables the reader to connect analytically the “individual” pathology of feminine narcissism with the exploitation of peoples and places defined as subject to the gaze and the greed of Great Britain. It permits a reflection on strategies of internalization, whereby the culturally designated other reproduces and, as it were, appropriates the analytical “individual” pathology of feminine narcissism with the exploitation of peoples and places defined as subject to the gaze and the greed of Great Britain. It permits a reflection on strategies of internalization, whereby the culturally designated other reproduces and, as it were, appropriates the 

Ahmad makes room for his reading by remarking the overlooked importance of gender and race among left cultural theorists (see p. 92). One wonders where he looking; but let us agree for the moment that that is a defensible generalization, and let us take its emphasis on gender as the principal contribution of the reading.

In the opening chapter of his book, Ahmad argues that the vagrancy claimed by the new radical intelligentsia, far from disconcerting the right, is perfectly conformable to its interests, helping along the “bourgeoisization” of the left. The process is assisted by the fashionable poststructuralist rejection of the social, of stable subject positions, and of politics as such: overall, a rejection of “belonging.” In Ahmad’s view, the sense of belonging, of knowing oneself firmly “orientated” is the *sine qua non* of effective radicalism. In literature, the litmus test of that radicalism is whether the work does or does not represent “heroic action” (139). (One is reminded of Sir Philip Sidney’s criterion for the highest poetry: that it feign images of virtue and vice and deliver models of virtuous action. These are legitimate and even revolutionary demands, no doubt, for an early Renaissance poetics, or for a society beginning its emergence from feudal absolutism.)

Ahmad’s critique of *Shame* centers on the grotesqueness, despair, and degeneracy of the novel’s social landscape (151). In particular, Rushdie’s female characters are “pauly, shallow ... disagreeable and frequently repugnant.” According to Ahmad, these characters should figure a “regenerative possibility” in the novel (144). Worst of all, there is Sufiya, the bestial heroine of the tale. By subjecting this revolutionary *manqué* to a fever that leaves her “with the brain of a six-year-old,” Rushdie represents the socially imposed disadvantage of Sufiya’s gender as an irremediable physiological defect. The displacement, in naturalizing the shame that properly belongs to Sufiya’s victimized cultural position, provokes an existential or psychological (and, in both cases, quietist) reading rather than an activist one.

Second, when Sufiya is given a degree of agency — her chance at heroism, as it were — her actions embody the debasing and eroticized stereotypes of a sexist culture. Her revenge for the miseries visited upon her as a woman and a half-wit reproduces the baseness of that history in a gendered mimicry. She becomes (148, 150) “the virgin who is really a vampire, the irresistible temptress who seduces men in order to kill them, ... Amazon, man-eating shrew,” and so on. Sufiya’s action, far from regenerative, takes the form of a libidinal excess monstrously unrelated either to the “real” needs, tendencies, and dignity of women (see p. 150, Ahmad’s “in praise of women”) or to the particular indignities she has suffered. Rushdie “fashion[s] a macabre caricature of what female resistance to cruelties might be; the woman herself becomes, in this version, a rapist” (149). Finally, there is the failure of Rushdie’s Pakistan to achieve the status of home in the novel (136). It is, indeed, “precisely not home,” another grotesque forfeit, this, on Rushdie’s part, of the regenerative potential of his fiction.

Ahmad wants to read Sufiya’s “symptom” — her difference from other women and her want of sufficient reason — as the thing that prevents her from developing a sense of belonging prerequisite to political consciousness. The force of his critique follows from the implied premise that solidarity and rational, effective activism come easily to “normal” women living under oppression, women whose suffering is, in a way Ahmad does not explain, separate from their identity and their imaginative, transformative capacities.

“Disorientating,” in Ahmad’s lexicon, means disabling (65). On page 129, in the prelude to his reading of *Shame*, we learn the following:

> What is new in the contemporary ... philosophies and the literary ideologies which have arisen since the 1960’s ... is that the idea of belonging is itself being abandoned as antiquated false consciousness. The terrors of High Modernism at the prospect of inner fragmentation and social disconnection have now been stripped ... of their tragic edge.

In other words, Rushdie, as a practicing postmodernist, idealizes the lamentably dispossessed and irrational Sufiya, even as he shrouds her in the oldest and darkest misogynist myths. He uses her dispossession (her abandonment by her culture and to her depravity) to justify his own poetics of vagrancy. In order to make that connection, Ahmad must aver that Rushdie “romanticizes [Sufiya’s] violence,” figuring her rampages in the novel as “self-redemption” (150).
On the face of it, the rejection of the idea of belonging would seem to be a dangerously complaisant tendency. There is a reason, however, why black, feminist, and gay and lesbian critics have repudiated the notion of belonging and of the place-, community-, and nation-based subjectivities that go with it. What is denounced by this new politics is not collectivity, not affinity, and not shared and effective political agency but rather the ideal of univocally and/or hierarchically structured belonging. It is the model of a stable and somehow given coincidence between identity and function/gender/ethnicity/race and so forth that is refused. The reason for this is that belonging as thus defined has long been a dream of the master and therefore not, for many women and persons of color and of transgressive sexualities, a usable political identity. For those who are socially constituted as other, unnatural, mixed, and inconstant, belonging is confinement and repression, not self-realization: it is belonging as a noun of possession, the realizing object of someone else's identity. Because belonging, within patriarchal and logocentric cultures, is the marked term, a place always already occupied and inscribed by the dominant group, belonging itself, regardless of the constituency, can only mean belonging "to" that group, legitimating it by one's opposition. I am reminded of Paolo Freire's caution: "As long as [the oppressed] live in the duality in which to be is to be like, and to be like is to be like the oppressor," there is no freedom.33

What is sought in the concept of migrancy is not the separatist fantasy that grounds Ahmad's argument but a dismantling of the binary of inside and outside, home and exile, a reconstitution of the terms. Sufiya's wandering, her unbelonging, is not such a reconstitution. Rushdie does not romanticize the violence nor offer it as an image of "self-redemption." It is, however, a statement of the fact that, under certain conditions, reason can itself be irrational, in the sense of being occupied by strength of force, not justice. It can be gendered in such a way as to make it turn against those who are not licensed to use it.

Here, as elsewhere in the book, Ahmad's practice and preaching part company. Early on, he deplores the "power of the Right ... to dictate the terms of engagement," a power that "sets the objective limits for the Left itself" (65). The term he adopts here, "belonging," as the condition of self- and collective realization, is far more fundamental than those he accuses others of taking uncritically from the right. The class and gender signature of the term "belonging" emerges in the causal examples Ahmad adduces: the "day to day drudgeries of political parties and trade unions." Whose drudgeries and whose way of "belonging" are these? It is also worth recalling that when belonging (as opposed to hysteria, inconstancy, and competition for the male gaze) has been inscribed as female it has meant belonging in nature through the magic of reproduction. Again, this is not a politically usable form of belonging.

Rushdie's novel provides the opportunity to connect the choice of a postmodernist location (152) — from a certain perspective, a weak and perverse choice — with the peculiar weakness and strangeness attached to the social construction and psychic experience of women within certain cultures. (One thinks of the phrase, "writing like a woman," Derrida's expression for a profoundly countercultural discourse.) Through Rushdie's novel, one could be moved to define a position outside or between the given options of heroic action and wanton violence; one could deconstruct their polarity, that is, as well as their gender determination.

To do this, however, one must first acknowledge the mythic register of the fiction and also (far more basic but somehow overlooked by Ahmad) the fact that the text is a novel, a fiction, and that the actions and passions of its characters are not lightly veiled versions of Rushdie's commitments. I offer just one example of the authorial ventriloquism Ahmad finds everywhere in the book. He quotes a passage, spoken in the novel by Sufiya's husband, Shakil. Referring to his wife's murderous exploits, Shakil says,

For the first time in her life ... that girl is free. He imagined her proud; proud of her strength, proud of the violence that was making her a legend, that prohibited anyone from telling her what to do, or whom to be, or what she should have been and was not; yes, she had risen above everything. [281]

Here is Ahmad:

This is, of course, Rushdie himself speaking; there is nothing in Shakil's character to suggest that he is capable of such an act of imaginative understanding. [149]

I think there is a great deal in Shakil's situation or "character" to suggest he is capable of just such a judgment. (Ahmad's distinction between character and situation and his postulate of the former as the privileged critical object is another piece of what is either an astonishing hermeneutic naiveté or outright idealism.) Shakil is depicted in the novel as a figure of entitlement. He is a doctor, a member of the profession that makes others in general (and Sufiya in particular) "object[s] of medical interventions" (146). (That phrase is Ahmad's, offered by way of establishing Sufiya's humiliation). Shakil is also the husband who sleeps with his wife's servant, leaving the marriage unconsummated. Shakil's pride in an action that "prohibited anyone from telling [Sufiya] what to do, or whom to be" and so on is the natural extension (to Sufiya, his property) of his own socially guaranteed transcendence of duty and kindness, of his belief that he achieves that transcendence by his own wits and courage, and of his own "shamelessness personified" (149) (Ahmad's epithet).

It should not need saying that the characters do not speak for Rushdie, or not in the shockingly simplenimed way proposed by Ahmad (149). He cites, for example, "Rushdie's failure to conceive of a real possibility of regenerative projects" (149). This failure is the narrator's, not the novel's, a work that, in dramatizing this failure, establishing some distance from it, carves out a place or possibility of knowing and changing. The question to ask is, What does it mean that the narrator cannot conceive of that happy ending and that Rushdie
will not do it for him? With what effects and with what necessity does the novel stage a "dialectic of shamelessness and shame, and their condensation in eruptions of violence" (146)? Ahmad decries that stalemate as "fundamentally flawed," by reference to syncretic dialectic conceived as a transcendental law, one supposes. Surely the appropriate Marxist move is to search out the historical conditions of that representation of arrested dialectic (in the manner of, e.g., E. P. Thompson, reading Wordsworth's postrevolutionary quietism). One would not think it necessary to remind a Marxist critic, writing in 1991, that "historical conditions" do not translate into covert personal and professional investments on the part of an author. One should not have to say that critical analysis is not the same thing as discrediting the work's self-representation. (This sort of one-dimensional debunking operation is very much the right establishment's view of canonical intervention. Ahmad plays right into their hands.) Ahmad tries (138) to conceal the moralism and spleen of his exercise, tries to make it look "objective," by saying that Rushdie's class and cultural position (not his character) rule out the possibility of representing "heroic action" (139). What he suppresses by the claim is not only the historicity of "heroic action" (a word from a very "embourgeoisified" lexicon) but the fact that the contradictions and arrests that deform Rushdie's novel, keeping it from assuming some received utopian shape, also give it the power to shadow forth its culture's immanent and founding negation.

Consider, by way of contrast, the happy ending of Jane Eyre, something of a source perhaps, for Rushdie's Shame. It depends first on a splitting of "woman" into Bertha (Rochester's phallic sadism in a female and therefore perverse form) and Jane, emblem of a rationalism so severe as to rule out even the sublimated passion of St. John's religious asceticism. (There are, in other words, no women at all in the novel, just two types of the masculine: the intellectually and the libidinally domniative.) The happy ending also, of course, requires Rochester's blinding and Bertha's fiery death: in effect, a single truncation, this, of the libidinal side of the phallic norm that dominates the book.

The job of materialist criticism is not to judge "Rushdie's imaginative sympathies" (152) and certainly not to extrapolate to "the kind of author Rushdie is" (131). Its job is to articulate in a rich and materially illuminating way the complex and entoiled sympathies of the novel. If, for example, it is true that Shame represents betrayal as "permanen[ ] and pervasiv[ ]", laying bare the miseries of a particular sociohistorical reality but, at the same time, through the redemptive imagination of the writer, trivializing, exalting, or universalizing them, then that is a fact worth noting. Having done so, however, one wants to relate in an analytic and historical fashion the mode of idealization to the precise character and provenance of those miseries. One also wants to hold onto the de facto doubleness of the formal intention, grasping that as a reflection of self-contradictory historical processes and not as a sign of the author's hypocrisy. Ahmad does not undertake that exercise, for to do so would raise questions of form, and that would complicate the mechanical and moralized relation between ideology and resistance to which Ahmad is attached.

When I stress the mythic register of the novel, I call attention to the fact that Sufiya's agency and inwardness are not that of a nineteenth-century realist "self," simulacrum of a person who has swung out of control, strolling out one day and, "out of frustration and anger, it seems," (Ahmad, 147), killing "two hundred and eighteen turkeys with a certain orgiastic relish." Some time later, she decapitates four men, hurling their heads "high into the clouds." "Nobody saw them fall." Presumably, they hang there still, like Belinda's lock, or Chagall's floating lovers, or anything else from the storehouse of mythically stylized, fabulous representation.

Sufiya's phantasmagorically staged violence is neither a cautionary tale nor a story of "self-redemption." It diagrams in cartoon boldness the way in which, under certain conditions, "the dialectic between shamelessness and shame" can be deadlocked: the way in which, for example, the formation of a revolutionary subject can be aborted. What the aesthetic reproduction of this deadlock can do, however, is to connect the destructive myths of a culture with its brightest, proudest enlightenments. The surrealism of Sufiya's rampages tags them as a myth of origins of her culture's organizing myths themselves, its founding sexism. Her beheading of her victims, coded in the first episode as castration (she pulls the turkeys' guts up through the neck, making a new head of their viscera), recapitulates (literally) the "upward displacement" through which the intellectual inferiority of women is established. The phallic basis of male privilege — the social construction of difference and the oppression that follows from it — is vividly outlined.

This is, in effect, a diagnosis of that arrested dialectic, inasmuch as it reveals a seeming difference, even an antithesis (i.e., Sufiya's madness and violence as against her culture's law and order), as an identity. There is, however, an affective force to the representation that exceeds its diagnostic value. This stems from its way of mythically mediating its analysis, bringing out the epistemically lived reality and givenness of what it shows to be a socially constituted difference. To be gendered in such a way as to feel ashamed of one's body is very much to be, as we say, "out to lunch," "not at home," unheimnisliche — or, again following Ahmad, "disoriented." To make a reader feel the meaning of "ideological interpellation," of culture's reality as second nature is, from a political standpoint, not an inconsequential (nor a self-defeating) achievement. Rushdie uses the form of his fiction as an act of resistance to the self-witnessing truths of his moment, to its unreflected immediacies, its home truths, its "fact." The magical realism that Ahmad brands as escapist and demoralizing is Rushdie's historically concrete and uncondescending way of mounting an opposition to the social construction of gender. Thus does he challenge the false and interested dichotomy of nature and culture, given and made, objects and fetishes, facts and myths. He does so, however, by conjuring the reality of appearances, for good and ill, and not by reference to some first and final truth: the truth, for example, of the economic, of gender, or even of culture.

What happens when we demand of oppositional art and criticism a "regenerative possibility"? What happens when a critic, impatient with having to
get his reality “by slices” (138, 140), seeks to transcend the historical limits of his knowledge. Ahmad’s tribute to woman (150–51) is one example. I refer to his odious sermon from the mount:

In real life many women have doubtless been driven to madness, violence, phobia, dementia. But women are not, in any fundamental sense, mere victims of history; much more centrally, women have survived against very heavy odds ... the vast majority of women have consistently performed productive (and not only reproductive) labour ... Erotic need has been, for women as for men, often important, but only in rare cases is it the lone desire, outside loves and solidarities of other kinds ... women are not, any more than men are, mere eroticized bodies.

It goes on in this vein. This insufferably patronizing blazon is exactly what happens to a revolutionary criticism when it abandons its commitment to a method and to the uncomfortable self-contradictions of that method, when it neglects questions of form, representation, mediation, subjectivity, when it speaks for everyone because it speaks from an imagined place: not the ivory tower but the barricade — both, fantasies of empowering isolation. This paean to womankind is of a piece with Ahmad’s smugly benevolent and masculinist exaltation of the trade union and political party.

Sufiya’s violence sketches out the objective reality of the subjectivity lived by an underclass that is not a class in the Marxist sense and thus not included in the revolutionary self-transformation promised to the proletariat. Rushdie’s “postmodern valorization of migrancy and unbelonging” is an act of solidarity with the unheimliche of women in most of the worlds we know: estranged from their bodies, known to themselves as monstrous, and, at the same time, idealized for their naturalness and bodily at-homeness: a state of being at once double, deprived, and noncoincident.

As for Pakistan’s failure to achieve the status of “home” in the novel, it is worth pointing out that, if “home” was for James Joyce et al. (for modernism, as characterized by Ahmad) inversely and mechanically constituted by reference to the demonized East, then the “postmodern” representation of Pakistan as a complex, porous, and nontotalizable space rather a bounded and organized identity form, that archetypal place we call “home,” would seem to be the very opposite of an exploitative idealization. Indeed, the ambivalences and ambiguities Ahmad denounces in Shame should by Ahmad’s own logic represent the objective form of the economic and cultural complexities of Rushdie’s world.

As Ahmad says, Rushdie’s aesthetic “choice” is connected to his “choice” to leave Pakistan, which he experienced as “suffocating.” Ahmad righteousness condemns this “self-imposed exile,” invidiously comparing it to the real misery of persons legally or forcibly expelled by their governments. The distinction between voluntary and involuntary exile draws on a model of consciousness and freedom that belongs to that bourgeois liberal individualism upon which so much scorn is heaped in this book. Who is to judge the exigency of exile? What does “choice” mean for those whose environment “suffocat[es]” them? By what logic, through what mechanisms, could such a choice not be informed, profoundly so, by “external” factors, imperatives, coercions that need not take the form of a state edict to exercise their influence? Ahmad’s rigid, restricted, identitarian, and masculinist understanding of the self is everywhere in this book.

In Theory wants to effect a rededication among oppositional critics. To describe its “regenerative project” (149), I use a phrase that was coined to describe Milton’s ambitions for Paradise Lost, composed in the dark days following the failure of the Puritan revolution. The phrase, “reconstitute the grounds of hope,” is also used in the scholarly literature to characterize Wordsworth’s effort in The Prelude, written in the wake of the French Revolution’s transmogrification from a war of liberation into a war of conquest.

What gives Milton’s and Wordsworth’s epics their force and feeling is their struggle to enact their reconsecration at the level of form. Both poems resist the binary politics and poetics of self-definition that had enthralled them in earlier days. Both try to give a narrative, figural, doctrinal, and affective reality to a more complex, enfolded, inclusive, and paradoxical truth, where “grave and gay,” belief and knowledge, tyranny and freedom contaminate and contain one another. This dialectical representation is not, in the case of Milton or Wordsworth, disabling, cynical, nihilistic, or escapist. It is, however, a representational form whose oppositional value exists only insofar as it is socially and critically reproduced. The critique that is lodged in these poems, their negation of affirmative culture, has no independent and stable and thinglike existence.

In Theory, a book that proposes a place beyond theory, uncompromised by problems pertaining to knowledge and power, dissipates the force of its intellectual and factual resources. It can appeal only to the novice or to some self-designated company of the elect. The mechanisms of this book are the same as those of right-wing attack. It holds up for ridicule and contempt the hypocrisy and confusion of the enemy: that is, the left’s effort to challenge the grammar of a Manichaean thinking and feeling, its willingness to entertain contradiction in its own, textual and intellectual body, its drive to reshape the language of explanation and the codes of evidence because it knows that not to do so is to let itself be used by the normativities secreted in the given codes.

Like Alan Bloom, Aijaz Ahmad makes the accessibility and back-to-basics energy of his position its attraction, and everything else, all that is difficult in ways that do not seem immediately ennobling or instructive, is characterized as elitist. Again, Ahmad forgets what is perhaps the salient contribution of historical materialism: its proposal and enactment of the fact that ideas, consciousness, and language are always made and mediated by the modes and relations of production that are dominant and/or ideologically compelling within the social formation. All knowledge is therefore partial, and the stronger its claim to uncompromised, unmediated, disinterested vision of the whole,
the more dangerous it becomes. This is the central flaw of Enlightenment and its cynical reason, a reason that is always at one with affirmative culture, unless there is also "equal allegiance to irreconcilable pressures" (71; my emphasis). Ahmad uses that phrase to show up the softness and dishonesty of today's radical critics. I use it as a reminder that as long as our world and our experience of it are characterized by "irreconcilable pressures," our discourses of knowledge and power, our critique and our fiction, must acknowledge this in the most thoroughgoing way. Anything less is to work single-mindedly in the service of ideology.

This sort of understanding is rudimentary, I think more so than the themes of empowerment. Without it, the rebarbative logic of capital—deeply vicious, superficially farcical—is perpetuated. Both those qualities emerge from this "courageously unfashionable" book, which succeeds only in making a new fashion statement.

Notes

This essay is part of a debate about Aijaz Ahmad's book In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures (London: Verso, 1992). I thank Jim Chandler for his rigorous and also very generous reading of this piece. I have tried to use the good advice that came of it.

1. Quoted from back jacket, Ahmad, In Theory.
4. When Adorno wants to grouse, as in Minima Moralia, he casts his invective as aphorisms. In this he perhaps follows Marx, whose unequivocal differences with Feuerbach take the (parodic) form of the thesis, the logical expression of that self-identity that grounds analytic reason and the Enlightenment science built upon it, the real target of Marx's attack.
5. Lawler (1982). While Hegel allows for a dialectical understanding of logical contradiction, he does not dissolve the category or deny the utility of logical or formal contradiction. By the latter, he means contrastive, externally defined opposition where the terms are either mutually indifferent or semiotically dependent but nonconstitutive. Dialectical contradiction is more like paradox or self-contradiction, where "there is an intrinsic connection between the two contradictory statements," one of which "appears to develop out of" the other, and where the propositional relation corresponds to the self-determining necessary antithesis of identity and difference in the object (Lawler 1982: 26–27).
7. Ahmad (205): "Susobhan Sarkar, sociologists like A.R. Desai, militants and intellectuals like E.M.S. Namboodripad, not to speak of D.D. Kosambi ... span many years of both the colonial and the post-colonial periods, and none of them, let alone scores of others, displays the kind of cut-and-dried characteristics that Said attaches so nearly to his category of 'colonial' and 'post-colonial' intellectuals." This is the closest Ahmad comes to identifying his visionary company.
19. Ibid.
20. An example: Writing of the Egdon heath scene that opens Hardy's Return of the Native, Eagleton reads the way in which the heath "blends the impenetrability of a thing with a quasi-human expressiveness" as a trope for the novel's central perception: namely, "that to live exclusively either the life of developed consciousness, or the life of the body, is tragically unfulfilling." Eagleton closes the essay with this appraisal: "in such a situation [i.e., a society wherein individuals do not 'find themselves reflected in the bodies, circumstances or relationships which formally express their sense of themselves'], a pattern of imagery which portrays material reality as the pliable medium of deeply subjective impulses ... acts, even if only in local ways, as a paradigm of creative and possible relations between the spirit and flesh, in a universe where those relations are continually disturbed or disrupted." Those relations are disrupted not through some sort of cosmic "hap," some "quasi-human" but transcendental indifference or mal-elevation to the human condition (that is the central ideology, if not the "vision," of Hardy's fiction and poetry), but for historical and economic reasons. Hardy registers those realities (e.g., "Farfrae's introduction of developed capitalist techniques into Henchard's enterprise"), but he positions them as something like efficient or material causes rather than first or formal ones. This is to say that the "local effects" of the novel and its wider, deeper, and more objective referents may be at cross purposes. Eagleton’s critique does not gloss over the way in which the imagery of Hardy’s novel at once "depicts" a "contradiction between 'subjective' and 'objective' forms of existence of perception" and, by the mode of that depiction, idealizes it (as, e.g., by dramatizing the "intimate rapport between mind, body and environment," a rapport that is magical rather than plausible, in light of the actual social conditions of the novel's world). See Eagleton (1971).
23. Ibid, 43.
28. An example of the failure to grasp this basic point: Ahmad’s chapter 1, "Literary Theory and Third World Literature," is nothing but a more detailed and narrativized version of Eagleton's survey of the situations of criticism from between the wars to the recent past. What figures in Eagleton's Literary Theory: an Introduction as a masterfully synoptic and informative outline, offered as a prolegomenon to a review of some basic critical-theoretical positions, is presented in Ahmad as an achieved critique.
32. Ahmad lays claim to a symptomatic reading of Rushdie’s Shame: “What I have attempted … is not a sufficient reading of the book but a symptomatic reading: the concentration on a symptom which is itself vividly central but one which may also … give us some understanding of the structure as a whole” (152). It should be noted that Ahmad’s understanding and execution of the symptomatic reading are diametrically opposed to the received meaning of that phrase. In Ahmad, it means relating the actual symptoms (physical or psychological pathologies) shown to be suffered by the characters in a fiction to the defects and illusions of the world from which the fiction issues. The relation is direct and mechanically reflective. The phrase, “symptomatic reading,” comes from Althusser’s (1970) great essay, “From Capital to Marx’s Philosophy,” Pierre Macherey (1978), in A Theory of Literary Production, beautifully elaborates Althusser’s discussion and practice into a developed hermeneutic. Althusser derives the symptomatic reading from a materialism that allows “relative autonomy” to the various social and cultural planes, sectors, and practices but that insists on the constitution of the basic and also total empirical field (including sensory, semiotic, and conceptual materials and relations) by the “structure in dominance.” That phrase is used by Althusser to mean what he calls the “effectivity of the whole [including but not necessarily privileging modes and relations of production] in the part.” The concrete result of this unevenness between partial autonomy and determination by the whole is a literary or, more generally, cultural production yielding up effects for which the concepts are not yet available. Such a production cannot therefore think itself; it can only figure its relation to that as yet inarticulate thought (basically, its relation to the whole whose effectivity resides in each of its parts and takes the form of that part’s constitutive absence or blindness) in symptomatic ways, such that the work’s truth is revealed through a certain hollowness or through particular silences, omissions, and lapses in its rigor. These betoken “the presence of a concept essential to [the author’s] thought, but absent from his discourse” precisely because the (socially necessary, determined) repression of that thought is what historically generates and logically enters into that discourse. The symptomatic reading does not look at characters’ symptoms, it hardly needs saying, but at the dialectical ratios of blindness and insight at work in the text’s linguistic processes, its modes of production.


References

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