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SANTA CRUZ

**FREEDOM AND FORM: MARXIST HERMENEUTICS AND THE  
SPINOZIST TURN**

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

LITERATURE

by

**Jeffery R. Marino**

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## **Abstract**

Jeffery Marino

“Freedom and Form: Marxist Hermeneutics and the Spinozist Turn”

Marxist cultural and literary criticism has long been preoccupied with determining the position and relative power of cultural production within the base/superstructure analogy. Beginning with the Second International, a particular brand of orthodox Marxism relegated the artifacts of cultural production to the superstructure, thereby considering cultural modes of production impotent in effecting any practical, material and political change. While this debate was largely put to rest by the Marxist cultural criticism of the Frankfurt School and beyond, a legacy of this problematic remains. It is arguably an implicit limit obtaining in even the greatest examples of contemporary Marxist literary theory, specifically playing out with regard to the fundamental representational issue of form and content. Several Marxist theorists have looked to the practical philosophy of the 17<sup>th</sup> century Dutch philosopher, Baruch Spinoza, in an effort to resolve the contradictions of the base/superstructure analogy, particularly as they occur within the socio-political register. In light of the considerable theoretical power tapped by this return to Spinoza, his influence on Marxist literary theory is conspicuously absent. Thus, the headway made in resolving antinomies that obtain in the encounter of Marxism with political life remain at an impasse with regard to Marxist cultural criticism, especially with regards to the purchase and power of literary production over and within political life. This paper puts several major figures of Marxist political and literary

theory, including Louis Althusser, Antonio Negri and Fredric Jameson respectively, into conversation with one another. I gauge what benefit may be had from synthesizing Spinoza's practical philosophy, including his revolutionary hermeneutics as developed in the *Theologico-Political Treatise*, with a contemporary understanding of Marxist hermeneutics, as developed primarily by Fredric Jameson.

## Chapter 1

### A Return to First Principles

There have been several significant backward glances by Marxist political theorists to the work of the 17<sup>th</sup> century Dutch philosopher, Baruch Spinoza, that have generated substantial momentum in furthering the development of *practical theory* on the Left.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps the most conspicuous absence in this series of “returns” to Spinoza, especially considering their shared concerns with reading, history, and freedom, is found in the development of a Marxist hermeneutics by literary and cultural critic Fredric Jameson. Considering the productivity of these engagements with Spinoza by thinkers on the Left, one cannot help but wonder how Spinoza’s thought articulates with the insights achieved by Jameson. Indeed, like Spinoza, Jameson fits into a genealogy of practical philosophy, or *critical theory* as it is known today. The constellation of ideas is the same; both thinkers are concerned with wresting a state of human freedom from ideological bondage and both consider the problem of *interpretation* as the primary locus of this struggle.

It is this notion of interpretation that places Jameson’s work in a unique category of Marxist *literary* criticism as such. Jameson’s situation as a literary critic immediately puts his work into conflict with the legacy of orthodox Marxism, which has crudely relegated literature to the inconsequential superstructure, once considered

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<sup>1</sup> The finest discussions of Marx’s *practical theory*, and its distinction from philosophy as such, can be found in Herbert Marcuse’s 1932 essay, “The Foundation of Historical Materialism”.

the ideological playground of the bourgeoisie.<sup>2</sup> While the relevance of literature and “art” as such was made immanently clear by the thinkers of the Frankfurt School, Jameson fits squarely into this genealogy, continuing the project of tracing the dialectic through its cultural and political iterations in the period of late capitalism. The working-through of this contradiction is at the heart of Jameson’s oeuvre. It first appears quite explicitly in his early work, *Marxism and Form* and persists at least through *Archaeologies of the Future*, where he locates the “utopian impulse” in the science fiction genre. Indeed, Jameson foregrounds this contradiction in the introductory chapter of *Archaeologies*, where he claims, “The problem is however the same: can culture be political, which is to say critical and even subversive, or is it necessarily reappropriated and coopted by the social system of which it is a part?” (xv) This is the core inquiry of Marxist cultural criticism, and, as we can see from Jameson’s recent work, remains a topic worthy of debate today.

But the quandary regarding the base/superstructure analogy, which includes such dichotomies as form/content, theory/practice and reading/critique, also obtains in the more traditional Marxism of political activism. In fact, it is in the political register that the debate over orthodox Marxist strategies of revolution is first waged, in the face, of course, of the spectacularly failed project of world communism.<sup>3</sup> It is in an effort to resolve these contradictions that contemporary Marxists have turned to Spinoza, according to Antonio Negri in his brief essay on the matter, “The ‘Return to

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<sup>2</sup> For a complete discussion of orthodox Marxism, see Georg Lukacs, *History and Class Consciousness*, “What is Orthodox Marxism.”

<sup>3</sup> For a prescient analysis of this issue, see Karl Korsch, “The Crisis of Marxism”.



Spinoza' and the Return of Communism," which appears in the 2004 collection of essays, *Subversive Spinoza*. Negri contends "the 'return to Spinoza' [. . .] shows itself to be an event linked to the crisis of Marxism." (94) This return, according to Negri, signals a moment of "critical reflection on Marxism and its efficacy — on orthodox Marxism, the historically hegemonic one — that refuses to withdraw into a negative consciousness [. . .]." (94) He goes on to say that the Spinozist turn in Marxist political theory is ultimately an effort to posit a new philosophy of communism that is capable of conceiving of totality as open and, essentially, democratic. It is via Spinoza's *Ethics* and his "first principles" that this new philosophy of communism is formed.

It might seem that a reliance on first principles is insufficient for rethinking a complex political and philosophical problem. Given that many of the critiques of orthodox Marxism have to do with the problematic tendency toward the distillation of human freedom into an abstract idea or essence, one must be careful to not boil Spinoza's philosophy down to an essence—the essence of the *single substance*. This "first principle" is crucial to a new understanding of communism and its ability to realize human freedom, particularly in the way it constitutes the very important notion of totality. But there is an inherent difficulty in dealing with the notion of totality, as we have seen historically with the example of Marx's totality and its infinite permutations and abominations, because its very nature as a totalizing

principle easily gives way to a sense of mastery and Power, or *potestas*.<sup>4</sup> However, an appeal to Spinoza's first principles, precisely because of its expression of the totality, is never the distillation of his thought to an easily manipulated abstract entity, but rather it always necessarily includes all of his other principles. Thus, and Gilles Deleuze puts it best in his *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*,

Everyone knows the first principle of Spinoza: one substance for all the attributes. But we also know the third, fourth, or fifth principle: one Nature for all bodies, one Nature for all individuals, a Nature that is itself an individual varying in an infinite number of ways. What is involved is no longer the affirmation of a single substance, but rather the laying out of a *common plane of immanence* on which all bodies, all minds, and all individuals are situated. (122)

This should be understood much in the way we understand Marx's project for the "ruthless criticism of everything existing", for such a project necessarily contains its own critique and is thus at one and the same time a criticism and a meta-criticism, always pushing toward more determinate forms of understanding that are inseparable from material existence itself. Just as Marx's notion of criticism is derived from the standpoint of the whole, Spinoza's vision of political life and human freedom is as well. But both are done in such a way as to leave the whole open and are therefore the opposite of any delimiting gesture toward mastery. So positing Spinoza's first principles is the positing of not just the single substance, which Antonio Negri and

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<sup>4</sup> See Hannah Arendt's discussion of Stalinism in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.

many others have pointed out is quickly turned into an ideology itself, but it is the positing of the open totality as an ontology, which provides for the radical rethinking of communism and ultimately situates Marxism as a powerful political theory.

*Totality* is, in fact, one of the greatest stakes in all this discussion of Marxism, cultural criticism and the contested ground of either the homologous or divergent relationship of politics and culture, revolution and literature. For all the work's shortcomings, especially in its tendency to reduce the whole to the universal, Georg Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness* comes extraordinarily close to expressing the notion of totality as ontology and why this is so important. Speaking of history as totality, Lukács says it is "neither the mechanical aggregate of individual historical events, nor is it a transcendent heuristic principle opposed to the events of history [. . .]." (152) Rather, the "totality of history is itself a real historical power [. . .] which is not to be separated from the reality (and hence the knowledge) of the individual facts without at the same time annulling their reality and their factual existence." (ibid.) Here, Lukács is concerned with developing a dialectical theory of class-consciousness.

Developing a theory of *consciousness* from the perspective of a thoroughgoing materialism is problematic since consciousness typically dwells in the philosophical realm of epistemology — territory that quickly slips into idealism. Here, however, Lukács describes a material process of becoming "conscious" that is grounded in what he refers to above as "reality." This is, in essence, a Spinozist notion, albeit couched in the verbiage of dialectics. The Lukácsian notion of totality,

however, is dangerous in that it allows for a universalizing of the subject (in this case, the proletariat) and in so doing imposes a kind of closure that gives way to the social form of despotism. Thus, we speak of Spinoza's totality as one that remains "open", since any gesture toward closure or universality is understood as an inadequate idea — a false or ideological *representation*, if you will.

We must interrogate the role of interpretation as it functions not simply as a method for understanding a text, but as a necessary means of obtaining freedom in our so-called "real lives." As Negri understands it, the crises of Western Marxism must be worked through in order to continue a relevant project toward world communism (or, perhaps, *direct democracy* as it is rephrased in various contemporary iterations)<sup>5</sup> and thus the much loftier goal of total human freedom. But this project seems to be waged outside the problem of cultural production — almost reproducing the old orthodoxy of shirking the cultural artifact as the extraneous distraction of the masses. But interpretation, as we have seen, is a central preoccupation of both Spinoza and contemporary Marxist literary critics. Thus, the issues of hermeneutics, narrative and interpretation as such must be considered in their role in this process.

The use of the term *hermeneutics*, it must be said, is inappropriate to understanding Spinoza's philosophy since the concept of hermeneutics presupposes a break or rift in the human condition — the very rift that Spinoza writes against. The figure of Hermes signifies this rupture; his occupation as the messenger of the gods was necessary because of the impossibility of communication between those on Earth

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<sup>5</sup> See Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude*.

and those who dwelt in the heavens. Fragmentation and difference on a profoundly ontological level, which is best expressed in the relationship between mortals and gods in the ancient world before the figure of Christ comes on the scene, are the conditions that necessitate a system of interpretation. Thus, Hermes is a figure of mediation; one who takes the inscrutable hieroglyphs of an ancient language and transforms them into the legible, thus finding meaning in new form. But this new language arrived at through interpretation always bears the mark of its origins, and so it never has the same power to affect and change the world, but rather it remains locked in a system of representation, always striving to restore the ruins of a past more perfect than the present. Thus, even as we continue to deploy the term, it is with some reservation and a recognition that the term has been mediated by several hundred years of meaning since Spinoza's use of it.

*Narrative* is likewise a problematic concept in this context. It must be remembered that, while narrative as such figures as the central axis around which much of Jameson's theory revolves, the category of narrative is historically determined as well. When Spinoza refers to the "historical narrative" it is necessarily different from the narrative framework of Jameson's concern. There is not sufficient space within the limits of this project to appropriately historicize the concept of narrative across the three hundred some odd years we are spanning in discussing these two thinkers. But a few words will suffice to make the appropriate distinction. In fact, one word may suffice: *Modernity*.

This is not to say that Spinoza was not modern.<sup>6</sup> Many of his ideas, indeed the constellation of ideas that provide for such a fruitful return to Spinoza, are remarkably modern given the historical conjuncture in which they were produced. With that said, Spinoza's conjuncture was by no means "backward" or "primitive" however. In fact, the particular time and place in which he was living was not unlike our own; free market capitalism was embryonic at the time, but the expansion of trade, technology, and the stock market were rapidly leading to the development of the attendant ideologies of the secular state and abstract personhood, as opposed to those more Medieval ideologies of myth and superstition. But because these new ideological formations were only being born in Spinoza's time, narrative itself had not yet been aestheticized and subsumed into the service of, or resistance to for that matter, these very modern regimes of ideology—and certainly not in the programmatic fashion of Modernism, that paradigmatic period of modernity that Jameson is so devoted to understanding.

And so the problematics of form that Jameson continually deals with are the products of a long history of narrative as it is developed into the novel, the narratological form *par excellence* that Spinoza never fully experienced. The fact of the novel is truly the historical line of demarcation that must be drawn in order to develop a productive and determinate relationship between these two thinkers. The history of the novel necessarily overdetermines Jameson's understanding of narrative, as it spans from such generic innovations as Science Fiction all the way down to the

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<sup>6</sup> See Steven Nadler, *Spinoza: A Life*

rudimentary architectonics of plot and narrative closure. But what's truly at the center of understanding the role of textual interpretation in the development of a libratory politics is the fundamental dialectic of form and content.

Much of the dispute over form and content in Marxist discourse, particularly in Marxist literary criticism, is a problem of determinacy: how do we determine the form, and what is its content? This problem is the remainder of the dialectic inherited from Hegel<sup>7</sup>. Thus we are left continually discussing the character of the content and *its* form, as though somehow we had forgotten that this structure of understanding is strictly Kantian. Thus the result of these discussions, and that which seems to be the happy conclusion of even the most noteworthy Marxist literary critics, Jameson being the paradigmatic example here, is that the content of the form is social relations, or, *the political*. But what are social relations but a *form* of political organization? If we are beyond humanism in Marx, and thus beyond positing the species-being of the early Marx, or even the *real man* of the *German Ideology*, as the actual content, but at one and the same time we no longer fully accept the Althusserian notion of structure, if for any other reason than that he rejected it himself<sup>8</sup>, then we must realize that what we call the content of the form is, simply put, a multitude of formal expressions.

What must be understood—what Spinoza lays the ground for and Marx fully develops—is that a radical formalism, that is, an approach to understanding the human condition, is not a *mere* or *empty* formalism. Content has too long been the stand-in for the Real. After Spinoza, and certainly after Marx, it is time to recognize

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<sup>7</sup> See “The Doctrine of Essence” in *Hegel's Logic*.

<sup>8</sup> See, *Essays in Self-Criticism*.

the actuality of form. The recognition of form, not as the privileged or primary category, but as the only category, solves the problem of representation and relation within the base-superstructure analogy. Literary or artistic production is no longer removed from the socio-political, because it cannot be discussed as a representation of it. Rather, in a truly Spinozian understanding of the articulation between reading and history, form and the political, cultural production is of the same ontological status as economic production and thus the traditional locus of revolution. The task of reading critically then, and thus the role of theory, is necessary to both.

So, perhaps ironically, or even perfectly appropriately, this study folds in on itself, achieving a kind of conclusion from the outset. This is so because of the nature of the first principles we are dealing with when studying both Spinoza and Marx. Their first principles, which we may refer to as Spinoza's single substance and Marx's ruthless criticism, both diverge from the teleology inherent to the Hegelian narrative of becoming. Origins are only dealt with in terms of historical event; chronology becomes a relative science, dealing in articulation rather than concatenation; and, even in Marx, as we shall see, the logic becomes one of expression rather than creation.

As Philip Wegner notes in his essay, "Hegel or Spinoza (or Hegel); Spinoza and Marx", we are initially tempted to think of approaching these two thinkers as if it were a choice. As though "Marx offers us a careful scientific or totalizing mapping of the mode of economic production we still inhabit" and "the supplement of Spinoza becomes necessary to think of a truly global alternative to the various fatally flawed



political systems that accompany capitalism.” (Wegner) However, Wegner ultimately concludes that “each pole remains a sterile one without the other [. . .] Spinoza without Marx produces a thoroughly idealist daydreaming [. . .] while a Marx without Spinoza leaves us with a critical programmatic politics stripped of truly emancipatory and radically other horizons.” (ibid.) Although this maybe a bit of an overstatement, the point is well taken. The goal here is to map the articulation of these two thinkers in such a way that neither is a supplement, nor a foundation, but rather dialectically *and* univocally imbricated with one another. In so doing, we may find that these “radically other horizons” are accessible not just through a critique of capital or the political systems it generates, but also via the cultural expressions of these problematics.

In what follows I will explore the recent readings of Spinoza in what I have called “the Spinozist turn.” I aim to develop a critique of these readings that simultaneously recognizes the productivity of a Spinoza revival on the left, while also offering a corrective that allows the proper space for culture and literature in particular to function as loci of revolutionary praxis. I will then examine Jameson’s intervention, looking primarily at his early work, *Marxism and Form*, to parse the critical stakes of the form/content dialectic, revealing the productivity of a return to Spinoza in understanding Marxist hermeneutics. Finally, I will propose that where contemporary Marxist literary critics understand interpretation in terms of the commodity fetish, a Spinozist understanding of interpretation is in germ in Marx’s critique of the money form, found in the early chapters of *Capital*. A brief

examination of Jameson's project as it is laid out in *The Political Unconscious* will reveal that Jameson's conception of history as a narrative form is as much indebted to Spinoza as it is to Marx, both of which are necessary to understanding the role of reading and interpretation to a productive process of achieving a state of freedom. All of this hopefully works in the service of further refining the project of contemporary Marxist literary criticism and revealing the extent to which the practice of reading critically is at one and the same time a revolutionary act capable of effecting real, political change.

## Chapter 2

### Spinoza: Freedom from Content

One of the greatest lessons we've learned from Louis Althusser is found in the first few pages of *Reading Capital*:

The first man ever to have posed the problem of *reading*, and in consequence, of *writing*, was Spinoza, and he was also the first man in the world to have proposed both a theory of history and a philosophy of the opacity of the immediate. With him, for the first time ever, a man linked together in this way the essence of reading and the essence of history in a theory of the difference between the imaginary and the true. (17)

These few lines are composed by Althusser in order to establish an identity between Spinoza and Marx as the great innovators of ideology critique. While the final analysis of this project will reveal a basic agreement with Althusser, certainly with regards to Spinoza and the "problem" of reading and the fundamental identity between the thought of Spinoza and Marx, this agreement will be qualified at nearly every level of what is to follow. I have quoted Althusser here first to raise the connection of Spinoza to reading and second to reveal the central problematic at hand by analyzing Althusser's understanding of Spinoza vis-à-vis Marx, the result of which is a reading of Spinoza's libratory hermeneutics that is filtered through a tortuous history of essence and appearance, form and content.

The first inroad to a critique of Althusser's commentary on Spinoza's theory of reading is found in his usage of a grammar appropriate to Marx, perhaps, but incommensurable with Spinoza indeed. This brief discourse on Althusser's Spinoza is only to serve as an introduction to forming a greater understanding of Spinoza's liberatory project of reading, which we will put into conversation with contemporary Marxist hermeneutics in a later section. The key claim here, which Althusser purportedly derives from Spinoza, is a fundamental principle of ideology critique: inherent within the structures of reality resides the potential (or necessity) for its expression in mystified form. Althusser articulates this as Spinoza's "philosophy of the opacity of the immediate". (*ibid.*) Is this a formulation befitting Spinoza? He goes on to comment upon Spinoza's "theory of the difference between the imaginary and the true". (*ibid.*) Is this an accurate characterization of Spinoza's philosophy? Both statements are heavy with the history of philosophy, and both certainly have their place in Althusser's historical conjuncture, but neither are adequate to Spinoza's.

Let us start with the former. Two terms stand out in this claim as particularly problematic, each in its own regard, but especially when combined: *opacity* and the *immediate*. The metaphor of opacity here is simply inappropriate for one major reason: Spinoza's philosophy is not speculative. While Althusser would undoubtedly agree with this, it is important to recognize that pitting Spinoza against an opaque reality revises Spinoza's thought to match a Hegelian framework — a technique which Althusser goes on to characterize as Marx's first and fundamentally flawed method of reading. The object of Spinoza's philosophy is not to see through to the

other side for the very simple fact that, for Spinoza, there is no “other side”. We learn this first principle in Part I of the *Ethics*: “Hence it follows quite clearly that God is one: that is (Def. 6), in the universe there is only one substance, and this is absolutely infinite” (Cor. 1 Pr. 14). This totalizing principle of Spinoza’s metaphysics precludes the productivity of any spatial metaphors of mystification—there is no kernel, there is no shell. Metaphors of seeing are of course not wholly inappropriate to Spinoza. After all he spent the greater part of his life working as a lens grinder, a profession many have analogized to his work as a philosopher. But if we are to take these analogies seriously, which would undoubtedly include some degree of literalism, we cannot conclude that Spinoza’s work at lens crafting produced a philosopher concerned with seeing through to another side of reality. This would be to maintain the spatial schematics Althusser must rely upon in order to develop his Structuralism, which, it must be noted, he eventually abjured. Rather, the analogy of the lens and its crafter is better suited to Spinoza’s philosophy in that it presents the situation of a distorted image made clear. An image that is always present, visible to the naked eye, and indeed observed by it.

This particular understanding of mystification leads directly to Althusser’s second term: *immediate*. To speak of the immediate is to presuppose a logic of mediation, a logic Hegel would be quite content with, but as Althusser might tell you, Spinoza would not. Again we can turn to Spinoza’s first principles and clearly see that “Whatever is, is in God, and nothing can be or be conceived without God” (Pr. 15); “God is the immanent, not the transitive, cause of all things” (Pr. 18); “Particular

things are nothing but the affections of the attributes of God, that is, modes wherein the attributes of God find expression in a definite and determinate way” (Pr. 25). Where the first two propositions are important here insofar as they constitute a ground, it is the last one that eliminates any notion of mediation as a productive concept. Expression comes to the fore as the primary mode of human reality, operative within the temporal schema of duration, and extending from the essential metaphysical foundation of God. It is with this proposition that Spinoza gives us an understanding of the whole and its parts as absolutely unified, without a dialectic of their contradiction, precisely for the reason that this understanding of the particular as an *expression* of the whole does not contain a contradiction. So it is clear that to speak of Spinoza’s development of a “philosophy of the opacity of the immediate” is not really to speak of Spinoza’s philosophy at all, but rather it is to invoke a brand of ideology critique that is pregnant with the legacy of Kant and the influence of Hegel in its conception of immediate realities as somehow necessarily inchoate and incomplete, only reaching their truth after a process of mediation.

Althusser’s second claim in the passage quoted above is that Spinoza linked “the essence of reading and the essence of history in a theory of the difference between the imaginary and the true.” One of our key conclusions here is that Spinoza himself would be in fundamental agreement with this statement. Spinoza does in fact link the essence of reading with the essence of history, but this notion is only understood in Spinozian terms if we submit Althusser’s terminology to a rigorous critique. If we are to appropriately understand the profound homology of history and

reading in Spinoza, it cannot be done within a post-Kantian framework. I am likely to agree with anyone who might argue that it *cannot not* be done in a post-Kantian milieu, but it is our job as readers of both the history of philosophy and the philosophy of history, that great distinction that Marx eventually clarified for us, to try. Can Spinoza's homology of reading and history be understood in terms of *essence*? And does the articulation of the two lead to a differentiation between the *imaginary* and the *true*? For Spinoza, essence and existence are collapsed in God, who is the cause of the essence of all things (I Prs. 20-25). I have already quoted the corollary to Proposition 25, where we learn that the essences of particular things are simply expressions of the infinite attributes of God. So, because God is the cause of all things, including the essence of particular things, simply to speak of the essence of both reading and history is already to determine a homology. This essence then is not a determinant content, but rather it consists in the unity of particular forms, which are expressions of a single substance.

Essence conceived of in this manner allows us to do away with any contradiction that might arise in determining a positive relationship between history and reading. With Spinoza we need not engage in any dialectical labor to demonstrate the unity of the two. Hegel would certainly accuse Spinoza here of presupposing the absolute, and perhaps this is true.<sup>9</sup> But what Spinoza's first foundations provide in this respect is an ability to leave content behind and push on to a determinate understanding of forms, be they historical, political, or imaginary. This formulation

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<sup>9</sup> For the definitive discussion on the Spinoza/Hegel debate, see Pierre Macherey, *Hegel or Spinoza*.

already answers our second question regarding the difference between the imaginary and the true. For Spinoza, they necessarily share an equal ontological status, and thus the project is not to determine the difference between the imaginary and the true, but identify their co-articulated expressions. Althusser is correct about Spinoza in many ways, and read generously even his commentary on Spinoza in *Reading Capital* can be extraordinarily productive. But it is made clear through Althusser's rhetorical missteps that the central problem any thinker faces when working to understand the articulation of Spinoza's project of liberation and the practice of reading is the problem of content. Rather than dealing with a project of liberating content from form or vice versa, we need to recognize that Spinoza has already liberated us from this very problematic, and we can begin to work on a project of liberation that is truly determinate, not based on the tenet of crude materialism that everything is content, but with the Spinozian recognition that there is no content as such.

The power of Spinoza's hermeneutic innovation, as we have anticipated above, derives from his radical and persistent formalism, the foundations of which are developed in the first part of the *Ethics* and actualized in the *Theological-Political Treatise*. We have already covered the foundations in our critique of Althusser and his understanding of Spinoza as reader; we must now turn to the *Treatise* to discern exactly how Spinoza's univocal metaphysics and logic of expression is marshaled against human bondage in a project of human emancipation—a purely theoretical project that is at one and the same time a genuinely practical intervention. In what follows I will show that a particular reading practice, based upon an understanding of



Spinoza's first principles, is not only useful in effectuating human freedom, but *necessary*, in the strongest sense of the term.

As Antonio Negri quite rightly points out in the fifth chapter of his study on Spinoza, *Savage Anomaly*, the problem of the *Theological-Political Treatise* is the problem of Caliban:

If the effects of the imagination derive from the soul, in what way does the imagination participate in the constitution of the soul? And, this being obviously the case, to what degree does the imagination participate, with the soul, in the constitution of the world and its liberation? (87)

Negri introduces the problem of Caliban here for two reasons: to establish the constitutive force of the imagination, as it is both the poison of human bondage as well as its potential antidote, and to identify an important moment in Spinoza's thought that signifies a break with his first foundations—the former will figure prominently in the conclusions of this study, the latter will constitute a fundamental disagreement with Negri. I will come to the former issue shortly. First, I will deal with my critique of the latter.

Spinoza's theory of reading is undoubtedly found in its fullest and most material form in the *Theological-Political Treatise*. However, the groundwork of Spinoza's revolutionary hermeneutics was laid before the *Treatise* was ever written, in Part I of the *Ethics*, as I have shown. An appeal to the *Ethics* for this study of the particular form of liberation Spinoza develops in the *Theological-Political Treatise* has not been a gesture to some original authority of the system, as though Spinoza

had hermeneutic practice in mind when he was working on the *Ethics*. Nor is it intended to schematize the *Ethics* in terms of the *Treatise* or vice versa, as Negri has in *Savage Anomaly*. But rather, it is to recognize that Spinoza's metaphysics, and thus his first principles, are an integral aspect of his innovation in formal analysis—an innovation that I will argue was not only integral to effectuating human freedom in Spinoza's time, but one that is essential to understanding freedom in our own.

Since our understanding of the libratory power of the *Theological-Political Treatise* is wholly dependant upon the concepts developed in Part I of the *Ethics*, we should begin with an examination of the chapter in Antonio Negri's *Savage Anomaly* entitled, "Interruption of the System". As is obvious from the title of this chapter, Negri identifies an interruption, or *break* between the first two parts of the *Ethics*, or the "first foundation", and parts III through V, or the "second foundation". He positions the *Theological-Political Treatise* at the interstice of these supposed halves of the *Ethics* as a "refoundation" of the speculative "theological and physical bases" of Parts I and II, and thus as a new ground for the onto-political theory of liberation in Parts III through V. Although Negri's argument relies upon a rather well developed historical analysis of the conditions under which these texts were written, which includes the fact that the composition of the *Ethics* was indeed interrupted in order to write the *Treatise* in an historical moment that seemed to necessitate a more "practical" philosophy, the method of deriving a break in Spinoza's thinking based upon a temporal logic of succession (dare I say *sublation!*) seems to be dubious at best and untenable at worst. An argument of this sort posits a problematic teleology,

where a system dependent on purported origins (first foundations), narratives of progress (the writing of the *Treatise*), and determinate ends (the last half of the *Ethics*) is implemented; whether this teleology was developed as a necessary organization of knowledge, or as a literal account of the way things *actually* transpired, it throws up a limit to the understanding we may gain from considering Spinoza's philosophy as a whole, and thus a consideration of its effects on the whole.

But I do not intend to exaggerate this aspect of Negri's work into a structural flaw that has compromised the stability of his entire argument—*Savage Anomaly* is an extraordinary engagement with Spinoza, many conclusions from which I will rely upon here. The critique is relevant really for only one reason: the notion of totality developed in the first part of the *Ethics* is absolutely imperative to an understanding of the function of form in Spinoza's reading practice. If this totality is superseded, or *refounded*, as Negri would have it, the essential ground of Spinoza's notion of liberation is effectively effaced in the interest of developing a politics based upon what amounts to a crude materialism — a claim that should become clearer shortly. But let us now turn to our (partial) agreement with Negri.

Raising the specter of Caliban here is indeed productive, though I believe it is clear just where Negri misuses the figure (he is a *figure* after all) of Caliban to signify a moment in Spinoza's project where he jumps the track, so to speak. The problem of Caliban is invoked to frame what Althusser calls, in an extraordinary phrase, Spinoza's "materialism of the imaginary" (*Elements* 136), and this Negri achieves. He problematizes the imagination insofar as it seems to be the very condition of our

bondage and at the same time the very condition of our existence: “the imagination’s ubiquitousness [sic], throughout reality, raises an infinity of problems” (87)—the primary problem being the double bind of the imaginary, or, in other words, *ideology*. Negri draws an important, if somewhat problematic, conclusion from the *Theological-Political Treatise*. He argues,

Caliban, alias Adam, poses the problem of reality no longer as totality but as dynamic partiality, not as absolute perfection but as relative privation, not as utopia but as a project. The gnoseological and ethical statute of modal reality is brought into center stage. But this means a radical rupture with all the logic previously elaborated.[. . .] (89)

A recognition of the materiality of the imaginary in Spinoza’s system opens onto an effective project of liberation insofar as it collapses the hard and fast boundaries between *stages* of knowledge and thus *levels* of liberation. In the passage quoted above, Negri has discovered a crucial aspect of Spinoza’s thought: the maintenance of human bondage, and likewise the achievement of human freedom, is part of a dynamic process consisting of bodies in motion and fluctuations of power, the horizon of the possibility of freedom fully within the reach of the human mind—*but it is not a narrative of becoming and thus not a rupture with Spinoza’s previous logic!*

Negri thinks that he must do away with the totality of the first part of the *Ethics* in order to understand a dynamic process of actualizing human freedom. Aside from the positing of a break, what he gets wrong in the passage quoted above is that an understanding of reality as a project does not preclude the organization of reality

as a totality. This supposed paradox only seems paradoxical in the wake of modernity, in the ongoing drama of the privileging of content over form, and then its eventual subsumption back into a dialectic, which only *seems* to resolve the antinomy, not because of a flaw in dialectical reason *per se*, but because the antinomy should never have been posited in the first place. In other words, because Negri has inherited the problem of content, which, when considered in terms of Spinoza's liberatory project does indeed pose an impasse, at least insofar as the paradox of overcoming a bondage that constitutes reality without transcending that reality is impossible, he has sought to resolve this paradox by disavowing Spinoza's insistence upon a radical formalism found in the first part of the *Ethics*. But it is this very formalism that allows for the power of Spinoza's practical philosophy found in the *Theological-Political Treatise*.

Spinoza defines both the object and the method of his investigation in the preface to the *Treatise*, which I will quote here at some length:

I think I am undertaking no ungrateful or unprofitable task in demonstrating that not only can this freedom [to philosophize] be granted without endangering piety and the peace of the commonwealth, but also the peace and the commonwealth and piety depend on this freedom. This, then, is the main point which I have sought to establish in this treatise. For this purpose my most urgent task has been to indicate the main false assumptions that prevail regarding religion—that is, the relics of man's ancient bondage—and then again the false assumptions regarding the right of civil authorities.[ . . . ] I

deliberately resolved to examine Scripture afresh, conscientiously and freely, and to admit nothing as its teaching which I did not most clearly derive from it. With this precaution I formulated a method of interpreting the Bible [. . .].  
(390-391)

We learn two key concepts from this passage: a critique of the ancient relics of man's bondage must be waged within the medium of its dissemination, that is, *the text*, and that the most effective approach to determining the meaning of scripture is critical formalism. Spinoza's characterization of his method here, "to admit nothing as its teaching which I did not most clearly derive from it", sounds strikingly similar to something I.A. Richards would say, or John Crowe Ransom, and it does indeed bear a relation. However, there is one crucial difference between the formalism of the New Critics and that of Spinoza: *history*. So these are the basic tenets of Spinoza's reading practice: a rigorous and unflagging attention to form, while at one and the same time a thoroughgoing historicism. Thus Spinoza is an historical materialist *avant la lettre*. For what is the general thrust of historical materialism if not the understanding that there is no content as such, but rather a complex of forms within forms (I suppose Althusser would say *structure*), none of which are determined by some numinous positive content, all of which are understandable when held to the light of their own conjuncture? We can see precisely just how productive this method is by briefly examining the fourth chapter of the *Theological-Political Treatise*, "Of the Divine Law".

This chapter of the treatise is particularly well suited to this project because of its peculiar juxtaposition of law and narrative form. Of all of the chapters in the *Treatise*, most of which directly deal with textual analysis of scripture, it seems peculiar that Spinoza finds it appropriate to draw his conclusions regarding “historical narratives” within a chapter devoted to the concept of law—understanding this connection is crucial to understanding Spinoza’s theory of reading. Even a cursory glance at the chapter reveals Spinoza’s extraordinary anticipation of Marxian semiotics; he recognizes the way in which myth becomes inscribed in discourse and gains such tremendous momentum that it begins to take on the force of law. This very understanding of law, as a form that becomes forceful only insofar as it is invested with a collective, human power—which is really, as Spinoza goes on to show, an extension of the power in Nature—is possible for Spinoza because he understands that there is no *a priori* absolute content as such. To be sure, he is aware that all content, such as a numinous notion of the absolute divine law, is an *a posteriori* construction of the imagination under the duress of inadequate ideas and inactive emotions. But even this is only a way of understanding Spinoza with a consciousness determined by a history of form and content. For Spinoza would never argue that the inadequate idea of law which includes an abstract notion of the divine is an investiture of form with inadequate content. Rather, he would likely only comment upon the extent to which such distortions are not adequate to the form of law as such, and thus the effort to invest law with universal abstractions is an effort to replace the form of law with a wholly different and distinct form, that is, *despotism*.

Spinoza immediately identifies these discursive limits of the concept of law in the first paragraph of Chapter 4 by taking a philological approach. He argues that “The word law, taken in its absolute sense, means that according to which each individual thing—either all in general or those of the same kind—act in one and the same fixed and determinate manner, this manner depending either on Nature’s necessity or on human will” (426). Nowhere in Spinoza’s definition of law do we find an appeal to the absolute power of the divine or of the sovereign. For Spinoza, law is only a “rule of life which man prescribes for himself”, for even that which we have come to call “natural law” is not strictly speaking a law. Insofar as we understand that natural law derives from the inner necessity of nature itself we are closer to an adequate idea of law as such, but strictly speaking, Spinoza argues, our term “natural law” only obtains as an analogy. (427) In other words, Spinoza understands law as a determinate set of rules for the organization of human life, be it political or otherwise, devoid of any abstract principles. This is of course law conceived adequately, irrespective of the various and sundry distortions imposed upon it by the imagination. It is also, by the way, law conceived strictly as form.

It is in this vein that Spinoza draws a distinction between human law and divine law. He does indeed maintain the category of divine law, despite the fact that he has already effectively deconstructed its popular notion as such, but it is reworked according to his first principles. Divine law, it must be remembered, is still a human law for Spinoza; it remains a method of political organization instituted by men and women, and it is divine because it is in the service of the “supreme good, that is, the



true knowledge and love of God.” (427) However, it must likewise be recognized that Spinoza’s redefinition of divine law in terms of the human is in no way an elevation of the human to the status of the divine. One could say that Spinoza supplants God with the human and thus translates the abstract principle of the divine law of God to the no less abstract terrain of the divine law of the human—in other words, *humanism*. But clearly, if Spinoza maintains his first principles in this regard, and he does, a humanism of this sort is impossible. All of this is bound up in a logic of the expression of a single substance, which is God, the first and only cause, every effect of which is only an expression of this cause. The abstract character of the law is thus wrenched away by Spinoza, leaving only a more determinate understanding of the appropriate place of law as a form apposite to political organization. This is effectively achieved without trading one abstract principle for another, because what is understood as abstraction by Spinoza, as I have already explained, is not a content inappropriate to its form or vice versa, which we have seen is the architectonic of ideological knowledge par excellence, but rather it is a problem of inadequate knowledge that is produced from confused ideas. Within Spinoza’s topography of forms, he locates the historical narrative at the center of this problematic. Spinoza’s discourse on law has become a discourse on narrative form. The tenuous link connecting textual analysis and real political intervention is reconstituted by Spinoza as a material bond. It is this bond to which we should now turn.

At the completion of his discourse on divine law Spinoza offers several conclusions, one of which is “That it does not demand belief in historical narratives

of any kind whatsoever.” (429) We must be careful in positing an homology between Spinoza’s critique of the historical narrative and the divine law, especially if this connection is to shed any light on Spinoza’s place in the current understanding of Marxist formal analysis, which is to be the topic of the next chapter. His statement here is historical materialism *avant la lettre* to be sure, but it could be construed, taken out of context of course, as a call to disavow historicism. After all, the conclusion he draws just before this one concerning historical narrative is that of the universal application of the divine law as he has defined it. (429) Again we are met with the problem of the particular and the universal, history and the ahistorical. It seemed as though Spinoza’s understanding of form allowed for these paradoxes to exist in harmony, without posing contradiction. But in the juxtaposition of these two conclusions, one concerning the universal applicability of the law, the other brushing off history, we have yet to lose our thesis on Spinoza’s formalism, but perhaps rather than prefiguring Fredric Jameson we have shown Spinoza to anticipate John Crowe Ransom.

This is not the extent of his conclusions however. He hastens directly from the notion that we need not believe in historical narratives to this claim:

However, although belief in historical narratives cannot afford us the knowledge and love of God, I do not deny that their study can be very profitable in the matter of social relations. For the more we observe and the better we are acquainted with the ways and manners of men—and it is their actions that best provide this knowledge—the more prudently we can live

among them, and the more effectively we can adapt our actions and conduct to their character, as far as reason allows. (429)

It is clear then that Spinoza's remark against historical narratives was not an argument against the importance of history given that it is grounded in the totality of Nature/God. Rather, this aspect of his conclusion is a remarkably early understanding of history as a text, composed by humans, most of who are not blessed in the intellectual love of God. Therefore, history must be *read*, and it must be read critically.

But again we must stress the materiality of Spinoza's thought. An emphasis on the textuality of history, which is by extension an emphasis on the textuality of everything that does not fall under *sub specie aeternitatis*, is not a Derridean claim, which has the potential of reductively eliding the political in favor of a crude linguistic relativism. Everything is subsumed within the totality of the single substance, which is truly infinite, thus one cannot say that there is nothing outside of the text in terms of Spinoza, because there is no outside available to constitute this relationship. In this regard post-structuralism posits a totality within the logic of duration, which for Spinoza, is absurd. The narratives of history, though they are necessarily tied up in bondage to the emotions, are not a mistake, and they are not an illusion. Belief, by which Spinoza means an uncritical reading, in historical narratives will not lead to the intellectual love of God. But believing in the necessity of reading these narratives in order to gain a greater understanding of the *real* lives of *real* people as they *really* live will. These are the difficulties of reading Spinoza, which

remarkably translate to the difficulties of reading history. We must always note the oscillations between the particular and the whole, while remembering that neither is subsumed or sublated, but each is always an expression of the other.

So law articulates perfectly with Spinoza's theory of reading. We can see how working through an understanding of law as that which only assumes the constitutive power of those who follow it would lead Spinoza to an understanding of historical narrative as that which determines the lives of those who read it, no matter how steeped in inactive emotions it may be. But neither forms are jettisoned by Spinoza. The law is crucial to human life because it provides a rational form of political organization, just as the historical narrative can be studied as a rational form of the organization of the imagination. In this chapter of the *Theological-Political Treatise* Spinoza has warned against allowing historical narratives to take on the force of law, and delineated a reading strategy that is effective in identifying the ideological power of the imagination and converting it into the political power of the multitude.

Thus Spinoza's development of a theory of reading consisting of both a radical formalism as well as a rigorous historicism is necessary to his project of liberation in at least two ways. History must be read critically in order that the errors propagated by the inadequate ideas and inactive emotions of the imagination do not become integrated into daily life and invested with the force of abstract law. But the development of a determinant reading practice is also necessary in the deeper sense of the word. What is often referred to as Spinoza's univocity, that is his notion of the single substance and the attendant logic of expression, describes a reality of forms

irrespective of content, as I have shown, which exist simultaneously and unveiled. Therefore, one cannot *uncover* the truth, and one cannot create a new reality, either dialectically or *ex nihilo*. Rather, one can only read the forms of expression of the attributes of God in order to better understand how to achieve a form of freedom.

## Chapter 3

### Radical Hermeneutics: *Marxism and Form*

The following passage from *Marxism and Form*, which I will quote here at considerable length, reveals a remarkable affinity between what Fredric Jameson has termed a Marxist hermeneutic and the Spinozist reading practice that has been developed above. What is truly most striking about this articulation is Jameson's tripartite conflation of reading, freedom, and form:

For hermeneutics, traditionally a technique whereby religions recuperated the texts and spiritual activities of cultures resistant to them, is also a political discipline, and provides the means for maintaining contact with the very sources of revolutionary energy during a stagnant time, of preserving the concept of freedom itself, underground, during geological ages of repression. Indeed, it is the concept of freedom which, when measured against those other possible ones of love or justice, happiness or work, proves to be the privileged instrument of a political hermeneutic, and which, in turn, is perhaps itself best understood as an interpretive device rather than a philosophical essence or idea. For wherever the concept of freedom is once more understood, it always comes as the awakening of dissatisfaction in the midst of all that is—at one, in that, with the birth of the negative itself: never a state that is enjoyed, or a mental structure that is contemplated, but rather an ontological impatience in which the constraining situation itself is for the first time perceived in the very moment in which it is refused. From the physical intimidation of the Fascist

state to the agonizing repetitions of neurosis, the idea of freedom takes the same temporal form: a sudden perception of an intolerable present which is at the same time, but implicitly and however dimly articulated, the glimpse of another state in the name of which the first is judged. Thus the idea of freedom involves a kind of perceptual superposition; it is a way of reading the present, but it is a reading that looks more like the reconstruction of an extinct language. (84-85)

This notion of freedom, as a form of thought in which reading becomes a political practice, is an example of Jameson at his most Spinozian. The lengthy passage quoted above could have been written by Spinoza himself, were it not for the Schillerian language of interpretation, which presents the main obstacle to an understanding of this, one of Jameson's most powerful formulations. The chief concern of this section will be to overcome this obstacle and to produce a clearer conception of the relationship between the practice of reading and the achievement of freedom. It is in these few pages of *Marxism and Form* that Jameson inchoately but brilliantly develops this project, only to leave it implicit in his later work. I believe these ideas are left undeveloped by Jameson because of the difficulties presented by the framework he operates within.<sup>10</sup>

Jameson goes on to describe how Schiller attempts to resolve the particular antinomies of the *Stofftrieb*, being the base drive of human appetite, and the *Formtrieb*, being the human drive toward reason and rationality, with that of the

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<sup>10</sup> For Schiller's argument, see *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*.

*Spieltrieb*, or the drive to play, “which underlies the artistic activity in general, and in which both the appetite for form and that for matter are satisfied together.” (89) And thus a unity of form and content (which Jameson refers to here as “form and matter”) is achieved at the level of the aesthetic, which for Schiller, as Jameson rightly points out, is always in the service of a return to the unity that exists in a state of nature. “Freedom”, remarks Jameson, “is at this point nothing more than the mutual neutralization of these two powerful drives (toward matter and form)” and thus the achievement of a state of grace, which is “for Schiller the very manifestation of freedom in the realm of the senses”—*Freiheit in der Erscheinung*. (89) However, when read with our resolutely modern sensibilities, as determined as they are by the reality principle, the idea that artistic production is capable of effectuating a true state of freedom is dubious indeed. As Jameson puts it, “making a revolution, one is tempted to say, is not like taking a course in art appreciation.” (90) Even though the aesthetic is never strictly aesthetic for Schiller, as it always opens on to the political sphere, it is still caught up in the highly troubled means/ends schematic and mechanical causality that gives rise to the kind of doubt that Jameson has so succinctly expressed. Because Schiller’s is neither a dialectical (Hegel) or univocal (Spinoza) politico-aesthetic project, but rather quite Kantian in its thrust, his push toward unity is always fraught with the antinomies inherent within the very categories with which he is dealing. It is for this reason that Jameson looks to a related yet alternative aspect of Schiller’s system for the hermeneutic character of his thought,



where he finds an adequate development of the role that art is to play in a project of liberation:

For the notion of a realization of freedom in art becomes concrete only when, in *On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry*, Schiller descends into the detail of the work of art itself, there teaching us to see the very technical construction of the work as a *figure* of the struggle for psychic integration in general, to see in images, quality of language, type of plot construction the very figures (in an imaginary mode) of freedom itself. (91)

Jameson is attracted to *On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry* primarily because of the way in which Schiller's thought develops into a kind of immanent hermeneutic system, where the two respective types of poetry, naïve and sentimental, become concrete recapitulations of the conflict between the state of nature and the state of civilization. Schiller does not reduce the work of art to a mere reflection of, what is for him, a very real contradiction in human history, but rather he treats them as figures of this contradiction that constitute a register in which these problems are, ostensibly, both determined and determinately resolved.

Naïve poetry, which has its ground in the ancient Greeks, constitutes the "concrete plenitude" of existence before the fall from nature, whereas sentimental poetry is a figure of the fragmentary condition that is modernity. Jameson is principally interested in the latter, as he argues that "we can scarcely speak of the 'naïve' poet as such, for the very mark of such a poet is that he has eclipsed himself

as a separate subjectivity, has abolished (or rather has never known) that distance between subject and object which is the sign of modern times.” (92) Thus the figure of naïve poetry, while representative of a certain period in human history, does not provide the hermeneutic framework necessary to understanding modernity. If anything, its value is that it constitutes a moment of totality in the Schillerian system, the chief characteristic of which is undoubtedly the unity of content and form, subject and object, and thus functions as the point from which, as Jameson says, the various “permutations” of the relationship between form and content can be deduced.

These permutations take shape in several different modes of the sentimental: the *elegiac*, which attempts to work out the problems of the subject that has been divorced from its object, and thus deals primarily with the psychological aspect of the modern condition; the *satiric*, where the problems of the political are registered and worked through, with a focus on the social realm of modernity, within which the subject is trapped; and the *idyll*, a poetic form “whose irreality is inscribed in the very thinness of its poetic realization itself”, and thus betrays the profound impoverishment of its utopian vision by virtue of its very reach for the ideal. These are complex categories that will prove impossible to fully explain here—even Jameson gives them short shrift in his essay—so suffice it to say I will not be filling out the details required for a satisfactory understanding of Schiller’s work. But what is important for Jameson, and thus important for us, is the way in which this particular structuration of knowledge works. It is important to keep in mind that Schiller’s is an early example of an endeavor to flesh out the articulation of cultural

production with political life. As Jameson does indeed acknowledge, Schiller's system is far from achieving an adequate understanding of this dynamic relationship, which is apparent from the way Schiller has been subsumed into the kind of "sterile and circular movement of a typology, of the weighing of phenomena against a static system of classification", such as, for instance, "the early Lukács, Frye, or Jung's *Psychological Types*." (93) However, the basic architectonic arrangement of knowledge that Schiller develops provides a framework for understanding the necessity of reading to a project of liberation. Schiller worked to show that aesthetic form is not merely a reflection of the content of political life, but rather that each is imbricated with the other, and that the internal dynamics of a work of art are not relegated to a purely aesthetic realm, but truly have purchase on the political, and thus provide a potential gateway to freedom. Schiller thus gives us a way to understand the role of art, or the *Spieltrieb*, as that drive which breaks down the barrier between form and content, subject and object, and thus eliminates the illusions produced by such a demarcation.

But this is perhaps the best we can say of Schiller: he showed that the political problem of human freedom was deeply and profoundly connected to the philosophical and aesthetic problem of form and content. He did not, however, provide a solution. Jameson remarks,

Schiller's thought is diagnostic rather than prophetic. A neoclassicist, for whom Utopia is essentially to be found in the past of ancient Greece, his thought is limited by the horizons of the German middle

classes of his day; and even in matters of art that synthesis between the naïve and the sentimental, between the natural and the self-conscious, which his theory seems to project turns out to be little more than costume drama and a meditation on the lessons of antiquity. (94)

While this is undoubtedly an unfair summation of the importance of Schiller's achievement, Jameson is correct to argue that Schiller's vision is both diagnostic and neoclassical. It should, however, also be emphasized that the major problem with Schiller's thought lies not so much in his conclusions, but in his premises, which are derived from the history of philosophy. It seems, perhaps, that the entire intricate drama which Schiller's thought comprises, the main conflicts of which stem from the separation of form and content, subject and object, real and ideal, is the same drama that Jameson is working within. If Schiller's is a costume drama offering up the lessons of antiquity, Jameson's could be considered a situationist happening, devoted to revealing the problems of modernity; both, however, have the same *dramatis personae*, it just seems that there is a different lead.

Although the drives of the *Stofftrieb* and the *Formtrieb* are certainly in conflict with one another for Schiller, Jameson contends that during Schiller's period they were still relatively symmetrical, "so that their resolution could still take harmonious shapes." (96) It is difficult to know exactly what Jameson means by this, for, like much of his writing on Schiller, his commentary is not well-developed. He is really speaking from the standpoint of his own argument for Schiller as the thinker who most productively drew an homology between political life and cultural

production, as we have seen. So the symmetry that Jameson is speaking of here would probably be better expressed as complementarity: the respective virtues and vices of the naïve complement and make whole those of the sentimental, and vice versa, thus leading to a kind of un-dialectical resolution or “identity”. These categories of thought can be put into correspondence with the real social and political life of the people because, and I am speaking for Jameson here, Schiller’s period predates the profound uneven development that has pervaded the society of late capitalism. So the lead character for Schiller’s drama, so to speak, is always a kind of Janus faced monster, with form as one face and content as its complement, in conflict with itself but never wholly incommensurable.

For Jameson, in the era of late capitalism, this balance has shifted, and, “what Schiller called the *Formtrieb* has taken an immense lead over its rival in the gradual humanization of nature, in the organization of the market system.” (96) Regarding the play of form and content, Jameson asks,

What if in a later period of socio-economic development, these impulses have ceased to balance each other out? What if the overwhelming predominance of one, or their mutual reorganization into something far more monstrous and oppressive, inevitably imparts its own deformity to the very movement that seeks liberation from it [. . .] (96)

In a series of questions that continue to be the foundation of his critical oeuvre, Jameson is referring here to commodity fetishism and the formal subsumption of

cultural production within the capitalist market system. This is an early example of a problematic that will gain in complexity in his later work, but is worth examining here because it provides for an understanding of the stakes in his larger project at its inception. Jameson exhibits a certain framing of the problematic that has proved troublesome in navigating the realm of the superstructure and its affect on the base, if for any other reason because his thinking maintains this kind of topography.

Essentially, he characterizes the situation as such: it was possible for Schiller to effectively marshal a project of political liberation in terms of the work of art, namely the literary arts as opposed to the plastic, because culture had not yet been completely alienated from the political. A productive analogy between artistic form, such as naïve and sentimental poetry, and political form, such as democracy, could be made, because neither had been emptied of its content. With the growing force of the commodity form, and its tendency to mystify the real, it becomes considerably more problematical to think of form as a potential site of liberatory praxis, artistic or otherwise. Thus Schiller's system is effective for Jameson insofar as it provides a "hermeneutic machine", or apparatus, for understanding the articulation of cultural production and political freedom. But the negotiation of this articulation within a late or post-modern period requires, according to Jameson, a modified critical tactic. For this he looks to the Surrealists.

Although he does not specifically say so, Jameson is interested in Surrealism because of its dialectical approach to attaining freedom in a post-industrial, full-fledged capitalist society. The Surrealists were not exactly Marxists. As Neil Larsen

points out in an essay from *Cultural Logic*, “Intellectual and aesthetic historiography record only a relatively brief interlude during which Marxism and Surrealism could regard each other as political allies.” (1) In fact, Larsen notes, Walter Benjamin’s essay, “Surrealism: Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia”, was perhaps the last elegy on Surrealism from a Marxist, considering that T.W. Adorno’s “Looking Back on Surrealism” reads more like “a veritable eulogy, i.e., last words of praise for something irrevocably dead and buried.” (1) But Jameson raises the specter of Surrealism because he identifies in the movement, with its penchant for the image and the object, a different kind of hermeneutic apparatus, capable of dealing with the uneven development of late capitalism, and thus constituting a kind of supercession of Schiller’s neoclassical nostalgia for the unity of the ancients. Rather than being a hermeneutic apparatus of balance and order, as Schiller’s was, the hermeneutic of Surrealism is one that accounts for the predominance of the empty form and the weight of the alienated object, appropriating the very force of the uneven development of capitalist production in order to dialectically transform our bondage to the world of things into a state of freedom.

This strategy is best observed, according to Jameson, in the Surrealist’s “theory of narration which perhaps most strikingly illustrates the way the Surrealists propose to reawaken the deadened external world around us.” (97) This is of course to be immediately juxtaposed and distinguished from Schiller in the fact that the focus is on prose narration and not poetry. The Surrealists were responding to a history of the novel that Schiller had not experienced—a history that included Balzac,

Zola, Stendhal and the golden age of modern Realism. They were responding, Breton in particular, to what could perhaps be termed the crude materialism of the representational novel, as it stood as “the basest kind of surrender to the reality principle” (*M&F* 97), where the world of things was taken as Being itself. While any good reader of Balzac knows that the thing is a means of signification and not merely literary adornment, the critique must be kept in historical perspective to maintain its weight. Indeed, one could argue that the Surrealist’s critique of the novel and its uncritical representations of daily life are waged from a critical point of view that these novelists were simply unaware of: Freudian psychology. Jameson develops in some detail the Surrealist’s reliance upon the Freudian topography of consciousness in their understanding of the human condition. It would be out of place to fully develop this discussion here. But what must be dealt with is the degree to which two major contributions from Freudian psychology have made the Surrealist’s theory of narration possible. The first is the understanding of the psyche as a play between two levels of consciousness, that of waking life and that of the repressed, which functions like a text insofar as it is a representation that is interpretable. The second is that of desire and the fantasy of wish-fulfillment. These two notions collide in the Surrealists’ laboratory theory of narrative form.

Although at first glance it may seem that the Surrealists are working under a refusal of narration altogether, truly they are interested in the power of narrative—both its power to oppress and restrain, and its power to set free or render clear the reality of the human condition—the first is the example already discussed of the



modern representational novel, the second is the case of automatic writing. But the Surrealists are not so naïve as to think that the practice of such a process as automatic writing is somehow capable of setting people free from their distorted vision of the real world. The way it works, at least in Jameson's description of it, is much more complex than the purely reactionary way in which it is often understood. Automatic writing is, when closely examined, not a refusal of narrative at all, but it is a complete and utter performance of the act of narration. It is in fact a kind of *über*-narration where not only is a story being told, and a story is indeed being told no matter how "automatically" it may be rendered, but a second story is also always being told, the story of narrative itself. As Jameson rightly notes, there is a self-reflexive dimension to the performance of automatic writing that renders it an hermeneutic technique. The critical power of automatic writing therefore does not lie in its difference from and resistance to narrative form, but rather its power stems from its likeness. Because automatic writing simultaneously produces both a narrative and a critique of narrative form, it is an immanent hermeneutic, effectively critiquing its object from within, according to the very logic by which the critic was ostensibly bound. Jameson will go on in the final section of *Marxism and Form* to refer to this as "dialectical criticism". For now, he simply remarks that in the development of this kind of immanent hermeneutic, a term that Jameson, by the way, does not use, the Surrealists are faithful to Schiller's notion that freedom emerges from the neutralization of oppressive impulses; except that now the commodity

impulse is turned back upon itself, its own inner contradictions transformed into the motor of its self-destruction. (97)

Thus the oppressive force of the commodity, as it is defined by Jameson as a kind of monstrous form that brilliantly obfuscates its true content, which is presumably human labor, is “neutralized” by the Surrealists, not by initiating a program to reveal the true content of the form, but by recognizing that such a notion is not viable, and that form as such is the only platform upon which a struggle for freedom can be waged. Thus figuration, rather than being thought of as an ideological device that works to further alienate humans from their reality, is taken up as an instrument capable of correcting the distortions of reality. So freedom must be thought of as form, as figure, rather than a mysterious and elusive content, if it is to be realized. This, according to Jameson, is exactly what the Surrealists achieved.

He argues, in fact, “The liberating and exalting effect of Surrealist practice can be accounted for precisely by this notion of figuration.” (101) This is achieved based upon, as I have alluded to, a certain Freudian notion of the psyche. The term Jameson focuses on, which he attributes to Freud and insists that Breton maintains, is *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz*. He admits this is a difficult term to translate, and goes on to render it as, “representational presentation”, a term that describes the way in which “there is no such thing as an instinct or drive (*Trieb*) in its pure or physical state: all drives are mediated through images or fantasies, through their object language.” (99) Therefore everything operates at the level of representation, and the only access we have to our inner drives, or our content, if you will, is through the process of

interpreting the stories that spring from the unconscious. In this way, even the seeming “presentation” of a raw feeling or emotion is a “representation” of a deeper, more primal desire. This schema of conscious and unconscious life, wherein that which is “genuine” or real is repressed, and lies beneath the surface of waking life, creates a new status for the object in the traditional subject/object relationship. In many ways it constitutes what Jameson might call a dialectical reversal of the opposition because the subject no longer maintains its privileged role as the autonomous knower, but is rather thrown to the mercy of the object, in a sense, in that it is only through the proper interpretation of the object’s significance that one can know: “So it is that some chance contact with an external object may ‘remind’ us of ourselves more profoundly than anything that takes place in the impoverished life of our conscious will.” (99) Therefore our desire for things becomes less a form of bondage and more a possible (perhaps even necessary) pathway to freedom.

One can see the considerable dialectical labor that Jameson performs on literary history in order to work through the limitations of form and content. In *Marxism and Form* he starts with Schiller as a foundation to his critique and works up and to the height of Modernity with the Surrealists in order to figure the relationship of the cultural product of art, namely literature, to the process of political liberation and revolution. We can see Jameson turn to various forms throughout the span of his career, settling more recently on the genre of science fiction which, as we have seen, presents the same basic problem of form and content, base and superstructure, culture and the political.

But the structure of this dichotomy remains throughout, which is perhaps why Jameson finds it so difficult to transcend. The dialectical work of sublating form and content becomes nearly impossible under a strictly Hegelian-Marxist dialectic when performed by the literary critic. This is because, as literature scholars, fidelity to form as such is paramount — it is the mode within which literature distinguishes itself from all other modes of being. Thus, while some *aufhebung* of the antinomy is desired in order to reveal the purchase of literature on political life and real freedom, it becomes almost essential to preserve the dichotomy in order for the conclusion to make sense. The mind must perform mental gymnastics to both preserve and abjure the operative binaries we have been discussing thus far. This only becomes possible in the final analysis within a Spinozist ontology, as I have demonstrated in Chapter 1.

In the following, brief coda to this project, I will offer an example of how Spinozist univocity is achieved in Marx's critique of the money form. In so doing I hope to provide a correction of sorts to the trajectory of Marxist hermeneutics thus far, as developed by Jameson. This trajectory, as I have shown, is overdetermined by Marx's critique of the commodity form. Insofar as this is the case, the dialectical analysis of culture and politics remains at an impasse, never fully achieving the synthesis that Jameson is after. A closer look at Marx's critique of the money form will provide a productive pathway to the continued project of Marxist hermeneutics, as it is and ought to be informed by Spinoza's practical philosophy.

## Chapter 4

### The Real Abstraction and Reading Freedom

The univocity of Spinoza's metaphysics, that is the simultaneity of thought and extension in the final analysis, the notion of expressive causality that pushes beyond the essentially idealist and theologistic expressiveness of Hegel's *Logic*, constitutes the ground for Jameson's notion of narrative as a socially symbolic act, and thus signals the centrality of form as both the essential epistemological *and* ontological category.

In *Marxism and Form*, Jameson claims,

The most striking model of the way in which content, through its own inner logic, generates those categories in terms of which it organizes itself in a formal structure, and in terms of which it is therefore best studied, is perhaps that furnished us by Marx's economic research [in] the opening chapter of *Das Kapital*, with its establishment of the intellectual category of the commodity and its description of the relationship between the idea of the commodity and that reality of commodity production which it both reflects and attempts to comprehend. (335-336)

Here we could easily turn back to our discussion of Althusser's understanding of Spinoza's articulation with Marx previously discussed in an earlier chapter. Jameson is raising the Marx of the commodity fetish, the famous and well-read Marx of the first chapter of *Capital*. The Marx who, as Althusser would

compare him to Spinoza, developed a reading practice, coined by Althusser as *symptomatic*, that is capable of differentiating “between the imaginary and the true.” (*Reading* 17) The Marx who created the simultaneously splendid and haunting image of the dancing table and the grotesque ideas emanating from its wooden brain. The Marx who, as Jameson argues, developed “The concept of the fetishism of commodities”, which is “of course the definitive formulation of this perceptual opacity as it is determined by the structure of our own historical society”—an echo of Althusser to be sure. (*Marxism* 371)

Indeed much, if not all, Marxist cultural criticism is profoundly grounded in Marx’s discussion of the commodity form, Jameson being a signal example in this regard. The commodity form has functioned the preeminent hermeneutic apparatus for these thinkers. The life of the commodity, with its peculiar composition as something real and something simultaneously imaginary, and its odd status as the object that is capable of replacing (or at least determining) the subject, has become a means of interpreting the world and the human condition. Jameson has largely used Marx’s discourse on the commodity form to think through the status of form and content in the human condition, and the ways in which the commodity acts as a figure of the disparity between the two in the modern age, as an example of a form emptied of all its human content. But we must remember that the material on commodity fetishism in *Capital* is only Chapter 1. Marx himself notes that

the commodity-form is the most general and the most undeveloped form of bourgeois production, it makes its appearance at an early date,

though not in the same predominant and therefore characteristic manner as nowadays. Hence its fetish character is still relatively easy to penetrate. (176)

The commodity form most certainly constitutes the foundations of capitalism and therefore likewise constitutes the ground of our postmodern, mystified condition of being. But given that Marx himself recognizes the abstract quality of his discourse on the commodity in this early chapter, I would like to explore the subsequent, odd little chapter in *Capital*, “The Process of Exchange”. Late in Chapter 1, Marx notes,

It is however precisely this finished form of the world of commodities—the money form—which conceals the social character of private labor and the social relations between the individual workers, by making those relations appear as relations between material objects, instead of revealing them plainly. (168-169)

The way in which Marx develops this thesis in Chapter 2 of *Capital* will reveal another, crucial aspect of the form/content, subject/object relationship that Jameson is dealing with in his work. The notion of the “real abstraction”, and the extent to which content as such is radically effaced in the money form, will draw out the link between Spinoza’s libratory project and Jameson’s.

With his turn to the “guardians of the commodities” in Chapter 2 of *Capital*, Marx gives the impression that he is now moving in the direction of a more material critique of the real people involved in the social relations of exchange, as opposed to the kind of sustained tarrying with abstraction that we get in Chapter 1. However, it is

worth noting that while this is true, Marx is indeed continually moving toward a deeper, more actual critique, this actuality is only developed insofar as it dialectically gives way to a more profoundly real abstraction. We can see this even initially in the rhetoric of the first passage in Chapter 2, where Marx posits the necessity of treating the real people involved in the process of exchange, but he does so with a peculiar language of estrangement, referring to these real people only in relation to their commodities, as “possessors”, “owners”, and “guardians”. How then are we to understand this vexed relationship between the commodity and its owner, a relationship that will of course soon be reversed? A close examination of the emergence of money as both a commodity as well as the universal equivalent form of value, which therefore becomes the necessary mediator in the process of exchange (mediation playing a key role here), provides a crucial orientation for an understanding of the subsequent chapters of Volume I.

Although Marx’s early analysis of the money form found in the *Manuscripts* is certainly underdeveloped, especially in that Marx seems to deal only with the effects of money rather than its causes (something he will remedy in *Capital*), there is nevertheless a key formulation found in the *Manuscripts* that throws considerable light on the magic of money. He says, “[Money] changes my wishes from being something imaginary, and translates them from their being in thought, imagination, and will into a sensuous, real being, from imagination to life, from imaginary being to real being. The truly creative force in this mediation [of the world, of the sensuous



objects of experience] is money.” (119) Now, let's hold this formulation in mind and compare it to an earlier passage in the *Manuscripts*:

Thus it is in the working over of the objective world that man first really affirms himself as a species-being. This production is his active species-life. Through it nature appears as his work and his reality. The object of work is therefore the objectification of the species-life of man; for he duplicates himself not only intellectually, in his mind [i.e. with his imagination], but also actively in reality and thus can look at his image in a world he has created. (91)

The juxtaposition of these two passages reveals the extent to which money effaces and replaces the role of labor as the essential mediating power between the human and the world. Whereas human labor was initially the creative force which connected both the mental and physical life of the human to nature, money becomes this creative force and effectively mediates the relationship of the human to the world, thus substantiating a kind of imaginary or mystified condition of being. If, however, this is the case, Marx must account for the conditions of possibility under which money is capable of assuming such power, an account that we do not find in the early Marx. This is precisely the task he completes in the initial chapters of *Capital*, and the topic to which I would like to turn.

Thus far Marx has established a crude and somewhat tenuous linkage between human labor and money. It is with his analysis of the process of exchange and his claim that money necessarily crystallizes out of this process that Marx begins to truly

account for the structural dynamic of money and its “galvano-chemical power”.

Central to the process of exchange is a key contradiction. Because the commodity does not have use-value for its owner, or at least because its only use-value is that it has an exchange value, the owner sells it to obtain a commodity that has use-value for him or herself. But this exchange puts the commodities into relation with one another and thus “realizes them as values. Hence commodities must be realized as values before they can be realized as use-values. On the other hand, they must stand the test as use-values before they can be realized as values.” (179) It is from this contradiction internal to the process of exchange that the money form is born. Marx says, “The historical broadening and deepening of the phenomenon of exchange develops the opposition of use-value and value which is latent in the nature of the commodity. The need to give an external expression to this opposition for the purposes of commercial intercourse produces the drive towards an independent form of value.” (181) Due to this continual oscillation between the poles of value in commodity exchange, it becomes necessary for a universal equivalent form to emerge, and thus function as the *measure* of value.

So, a universal form of equivalence arises out of exchange, not contingently or by accident, but necessarily. What is perhaps most remarkable and important about this development is the fact that the object which comes to signify this universal form is a commodity itself. Why is this important? It is in fact an integral point because in order for the money form to act as a measure of something, if we follow Hegel in his

understanding of measure<sup>11</sup>, then the money form must be able to identify itself in its other. This is after all Hegel's definition of Measure: it is the unity of quality and quantity — a simultaneous reflection into self and into its other. Therefore money is both a commodity, whose value is determined by the socially necessary abstract labor time congealed within it, as well as something separate from the commodity, which through the social process of exchange, takes on a form that is alien to the commodity and is therefore capable of acting as its measure. The effect of this process is that the commodity, which has come to signify the universal equivalent form of value, i.e. gold, appears to have this form independently of this social relation, as a property “inherent in its nature.” (187)

Thus money has an a posteriori appearance as a cause rather than an effect, and the money form becomes naturalized as the embodiment of human labor, even before labor is put into it. The result of this is the complete atomization of the people involved in the process of exchange, which was in germ at the stage of commodity production, insofar as the commodity became a kind of shell around the human labor embodied within it, but reaches its apogee in the money form insofar as human labor is thus doubly alienated, first from itself in the form of the commodity, then from the commodity in the form of money. This double alienation or, if you will, this negation of the negation, is what firmly situates money as the primary form of mediation between the human and nature rather than the productive human power to change the world. The key point here is that this process of radical and absolute abstraction from

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<sup>11</sup> See, “The Doctrine of Being” in *Hegel's Logic* for his complete analysis of “measure” as a category of thought.

real human labor generates a very real, material existence out of itself. This is the meaning of Marx's marvelous line: "The riddle of the money fetish is therefore the riddle of the commodity fetish, now become visible and dazzling to our eyes." (187) The problem in Marx's formulation of commodity fetishism, i.e. the theory's inability to account for the commodity's structural dominance, is solved with Marx's development of the fetishism of money as a "real abstraction" that becomes integrated into social relations through a dialectical process of self-mediation and therefore becomes actual.

Marx's dialectical development of the money form liberates the role of interpretation from dealing with the stratified levels of ideology critique structured by the commodity form. In other words, the analysis above does away with the crude dialectic of form and content. The notion of the "Real abstraction" can be likened to Spinoza's plane of immanence. Marx thus reaches a similar conclusion as Spinoza, only through a dialectical process rather than Spinoza's mind-boggling process of inductive reasoning. In both systems, if you will, reading and interpretation takes on a particularly radical and revolutionary character. It becomes *necessary* to the struggle for freedom since it is abundantly clear that bondage is an ideological condition of being that can only be overcome through critique.

Jameson himself recognizes this at the end of his seminal essay, "On Interpretation" in *The Political Unconscious*. Identifying *history* as the primary locus within which the struggle for freedom is waged, Jameson is ironically his most Spinozist in his deployment of the Hegel-inflected category of *necessity*. Jameson

states, “History is therefore the experience of Necessity [. . .] Necessity is not in that sense a type of content, but rather the inexorable form of events; it is therefore a narrative category in the enlarged sense.” (102) It is this *enlarged sense* of narrative that we have been concerned with throughout this entire project. *Narrative form* is thus a grand unifying ontological structure, which extends from the single substance according to Spinoza or as a dialectical-material result of capital according to Marx. In either conception, it is “what hurts”, according to Jameson. And insofar as “what hurts” is narratologically determined, the project of realizing a state of political freedom *must* be a practice of reading and interpretation.

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