

Idealism vs. Dialectics in Some Contemporary Theory*

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¹ Why place money at the center of one's reflection, at the center of one's mental universe? There is, of course, a delectable *jouissance* at foregrounding the supposed-to-be repressed, at conceptually fondling the unmentionables of a decent, middle-class academic intellectuality: the pleasure of transgression, *quoi!*, which a long line of thinkers and practitioners have made familiar. For it is one of the hypocrisies of our culture that, while money underlies most social (and many personal) deliberations and decisions, it does not enter the domain of acceptability as a conversational code. This discursive exclusion is limited to the discrete charm of the bourgeoisie in its social and cultural life, of course: in the board room, as artists and other professionals talk as professionals, in the union hall or on the streets of poverty, this reality of life obtains the centrality of its absence in middle-class social discourse.

But far more is at stake than the pleasure of the forbidden. Money, particularly in its form of coinage, is a form of social being that reveals its dualism in a marked way. Both matter (as ingot) and mental (as inscription), coinage participates in the two worlds established in the philosophic tradition of the west by the Platonic instauration of a world of ideality separate from the realm of matter. In spite of much tugging and pulling, that opposition remains constitutive. It is one of the modern paradoxes that the one major philosophical effort at overcoming the distinction — Spinoza's — should figure, in contemporary theoretical discourse, primarily in the work of Louis Althusser as part of an on-going Marxist tradition that seemed founded on the distinction of Spinoza cancelled. The subsequent critique of Althusser as guilty of

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'theoreticism' reinstates that distinction vigorously, and it continues to function in spite of the dubiousness which attends it. After Lévi-Strauss, after Derrida, the discomfort of using discredited intellectual constructs appears as the inevitable cost of any intellectual activity whatever. That is the overwhelming historicity of the common endeavor in the closing years of the twentieth century. We cannot help but use the concepts of our heritage, even as our critiques demonstrate their aleatory character and their implication within the hidden politics of discourse. That the forms of traditional logic do not lead to a satisfactory succession is by now a cliché, a worn coin of our time: that more subtle forms of a necessary intellectual duplicity also do not lead to a new dispensation, to a new, instauration *Aufhebung*, is a more recent and equally painful discovery. We are still 'after Plato': logocentricity remains the fatum of the West, whose efforts at alternative productions turn regularly to mysticism, bathos, or esoteric rigidities. All the disquiet quite properly occasioned by rationality has not produced a more appropriate form of critique than intellectual rigor and attention to detail. With all the distrust of empiricism and logical coherence which the post-Kantian epistemological critique has occasioned, the best work being produced by the generation of scholars now coming to maturity — one thinks of examples such as Marc Shell and T.J. Reiss, but others could be cited as well — operates as if what mattered most was a coherent and adequate representation of an external reality that functions as revelation of some knowledge formerly unknown. The archival enterprise, while it may envision an ultimate goal of inversion, markedly resembles traditional erudition.

From one point of view — the more traditional — our initial question ('Why money?') can be answered as follows: the dualism of money allows its use as an intellectual wedge or tracer in working one's way through the complexities both of the mental domain and of the material: because of its mentalistic inscription, the material ingot acquires the leverage to move material social realities that are of a different order than the inscription itself. In turn, this leveraging potential, precisely as the other side of the same coin, gives substance to the argument, encountered within the structuralist period, of the materiality of the signifier, and does so more obviously with coinage than with writing. To explore the domains of the mental and the material in terms of their binary opposites as conjoined within a single entity having currency in both is a fascinating possibility to imagine. Such an effort could undoubtedly be of use in the development of current theory of ideology, within contemporary Marxism, a far more subtle and complex theory than Marc Shell's use of the term at the beginning of *Economy of Literature*.

ture (1979) would suggest. The traditional Marxist reference, of course, is to *The German Ideology* which (taking the text on its own terms) claims to reverse the causative link between the ideational and the material in society from 'thought → matter' to 'matter → thought,' the position accepted by a tradition of vulgar Marxism without much exploration. It is worth noting in passing that a number of moments exist within *The German Ideology* which provide the basis for a deconstructive critique of the text, aporias which suggest the opposite of the over-all argument: these are fascinating and important moments, but they do not discard the undoubted general pattern of the argument, its 'narrative' structure, if you like, taking 'narrative' as referring to all transformative processes. Contemporary Marxism, following Althusser, has developed a far more supple imagination of the relations between the two domains, particularly as incorporated in its thought on ideology, where causative links are seen to operate in both directions (as they are in some texts of Marx and Engels). It is in the exploration of that set of dialectical possibilities that money might have been thought to offer the possibility of functioning as a kind of ideational tracer, to study the structures and processes of both domains of matter and thought. But that is not possible for a current of theory stamped by the constitutive epistemological gesture that restricts the cognitive endeavour to the domain of cognition itself, to the mental. Within this current, the domain has no grip or grasp upon matter, knowledge cannot be of an externality to the knowing process itself. It is only insofar as that material externality can be *represented* within the domain of cognition that knowledge is enabled, it is only insofar as any entity enters the category of *representation* (and hence abandons its status as materiality) that it becomes subject to the processes of thought. From this point of view, then, the dualism of money allows it to shuttle, not between the mental and the material, but between two categories of the mental as representation: the representation of the mental and the representation of the material. In fact, materiality of a social and a historical sort does gnaw at the edges of this intellectual endeavour, but in a limited, and as it were, a shame-faced manner. What is primarily in question is not materiality or the mental *per se*, but only the thought about them. It is for the exploration of the mental that the duplicity of money is employed here.

II
Given such a general theoretical problematic, it is hardly surprising to find a writer shifting gears in two successive books which, in addition, to their insertion in a particular time and place (an American so-

ciety of increasing conservatism during the Reagan reign), also address slightly different issues. Marc Shell's *Economy of Literature*, published by Johns Hopkins in 1979, brought together a number of previously published studies of thinkers whose work includes a critique of the infusion and generation of thought by money, commerce, and exchange. Its thesis goes well beyond the operation of a metaphor, though particular studies often begin with that. What Shell is after is not merely the presence of a metaphor, even a particularly potent one, but the functioning of a conceptual structure. Indeed, the metaphor is important primarily as an index of that structure. Successive chapters analyzed with great erudition and finesse passages of Herodotus, Plato, and Heraclitus; Aristotle and Sophocles; Herbert Spencer and Viktor Šklovskij; La Fontaine and Rousseau; John Ruskin and Marcel Proust; a group of thinkers who have considered one of those disciplines shunted in our modern episteme to an odd corner of antiquarianism, numismatics; and scattered throughout, many references to and citations of two thinkers whose influence is perhaps that of determinative antecedents, Lessing and Marx.

In this first book, Shell's fundamental strategy was the manoeuvre originally described by T.S. Eliot: these are not only studies of individual thinkers, they establish what did not exist as an effective force in the economy of contemporary theoretical discussion, a *tradition* of critical thought regarding the economy of literature. Such an economy has two dimensions: that of *dispositio*, the classical and medieval rhetorical term for composition, i.e., the arrangement of the overall shape of the individual text; and that of *dispensation*, a term whose religious connotations make this reader uncomfortable because it postulates not only a general order of social activity within which specific activities such as money and literature have assigned places – an epistemic order, an organization of the intellectual domain – but also a Dispenser, call it *Deus sine Natura* or any other term: an originating source. The key point for this tradition is that there is a link, and perhaps something far stronger than a link – an identity of conceptual structure? – between the large and small tropic exchanges that are held to constitute literature, and the contemporary thought of those other forms of exchange signalled by structures and transfers of money. Indeed, Shell goes a long way in the kind of reverse etymology best known through the works of Derrida, the recreation of an (original) unity between semantic fields separated by the increased analytic divisions of intellectual history. Such an effort was conceived of, in that first book, as a potentially transcendent one: Language is the final and original home of the conscious spirit of mankind, and it enables men to incor-

porate and rise above contemporary and socially "functional" ideologies' (EL, p. 9).

This idealistic note was struck in the very opening sentence of that first book, in what might seem a paradoxical negation of the materialism suggested by its title: 'Those discourses are ideological that argue or assume that matter is ontologically prior to thought' (EL, p. 1). This kind of jejune grandiloquence leads to shrugging shoulders and the hope that — as in this case — what is forthcoming will be useful nonetheless: if such a statement is true (whatever our sense of 'truth'), why would not its reverse be equally true, as is argued in *The German Ideology*? Does such an assertion imply a form of knowledge (philosophy, science...) that is not ideological or does not have ideological value? Is the notion that thought is prior to matter *more* true than its opposite? Or is it perhaps not, as a structuralist epistemology would suggest, that the two concepts, as binary opposites, are dialectically interdependent? That, indeed, is finally Shell's point, for his is a serious idealism: as the postulation of a structural ideal of thought (for dialectics is a structure, albeit a processual one), it suggests a kind of allegiance far more sympathetic because more interesting, in the philosophical sense of the term, than either simple materialism or idealism. Indeed, the notion of dialectics will recur, both as a subject of study, and as a way to help define the relationship of literature and society, in most useful ways. But it will be important to keep track of this notion of dialectics and to observe its operation in this discourse.

One version of what we can call this dialectical idealism is a fascinating rewriting of the eleventh thesis on Feuerbach. The introduction to EL concludes with a complex series of rhetorical manoeuvres within brief compass. Without tracing in detail just how it employs the topos of modesty to imply the 'theoretical totality' of its (presumed) 'argument,' I do want to note a claim that it makes and that I find surprising. The 'material hypotheses' with which the individual substantive chapters are said to start are said to 'hardly matter' in the course of their developing thought. This asserted immateriality of material hypotheses is puzzling, in view of the author's own elaboration of a conceptual structure derived from the money-commerce-finance nexus. In discussing the hypothetical mode of reasoning, Shell coins the expression 'hypothee' to denote the mortgaging of thought by such hypotheses, anglicizing the French term for mortgage: *hypothèque* (sb.), *hypothèque* (vb.). That is but one of his valuable contributions to our intellectual vocabulary, one which already suggests the identity of conceptual and money structures, but I find dubious the implication that the *Economy of Literature* escapes from the mortgaging of its own

thought. There is certainly a movement away from its mortgage, yet that mortgage does represent a debt to be paid. Such transcendent escape would not, of course, be observant of the originally financial meaning of *Aufhebung*: the payment and cancellation of a debt. The necessity of a serious, realistic look at one's financial status is suggested by the junction of the theme of the internalization of economic form with that of a necessary engagement of the literary scholar and theorist in the newly constituted and inescapable 'intellectual battlefield' (EL, p. 156).

The line so heroically drawn in the *Economy of Literature* has disappeared in the more recent *Money, Language, and Thought*, published by the University of California Press in 1982. There are no more intertextual transformations of the trajectory of theory to practice generally referred to as *praxis*. Instead, thought remains within its own confines and, it must be acknowledged, becomes ever more searching. While the new book pays homage to the self-consciousness implicit in the earlier establishment of a critical tradition of thought about the monetary form, its more piercing and adventurous chapters are precisely those in which that self-consciousness is in some doubt. Or perhaps it should be stated as a matter of language: the distance between the object language of Poe, of a group of medieval writers, of Shakespeare, Goethe, Kant, Hegel, Lessing and Heidegger, and Shell's metalanguage — the distance between discourse and the terms of its analysis — has increased. Postulating now a universality of economic form in all discourse ('A formal money of the mind informs all discourse' [MLTh, p. 4] — but especially the discourses of literature and philosophy), that 'money talk' is said to permeate all discourse 'ventriloquistically.' Without specifying the point, Shell seems to be returning to the neutralization of the Subject that was current under the structuralist dispensation: rather than having language, as a particular set of structures, speaking itself through the varied discourses of individual subjects, however, it is now that 'money talk' which is hypostasized as Subject. Furthermore, while the cognitive Subject of *The Economy of Literature* was present as self-conscious and capable of transcendence of the money-dimension, the present Conclusion is more pessimistic. It inscribes itself in the current reign of aporia. The thesis is not only that 'monetary exchange and symbolization, as well as associated processes of production, pervade literature and philosophy' (MLTh, p. 180), but it further asserts that the attempts of consciousness to engage this phenomenon fail: 'Insofar as the thoughtful confrontation with the interiorization of economic form in thought is necessary to thought, literature and philosophy are inadequate to the task they are driven to set themselves' (MLTh, p. 187). These concluding words (except for three brief appen-

dices) suggest a possible negation of the earlier book in its establishment of a self-critical tradition adequate to the task it had set itself. Not only does thought no longer lead fully and dialectically to its opposite term: now cannibalized by thought, matterless matter is a form of thought which cannot be adequate to itself within the domain of thought.

III

The topics of *Money, Language, and Thought* are Poe's 'The Gold Bug'; the grail legend in medieval narrative; *The Merchant of Venice*; Goethe's *Faust*; the interplay of monetary form and the dialectic in Kant and Hegel; and a comparison of Lessing and Heidegger in their respective handling of the concepts of money and truth. The earlier work posited a conscious, self-critical tradition; the second does not claim as much: 'monetary exchange and symbolization, as well as associated processes of production, pervade literature and philosophy, providing thought with form and with a discomforting, but motivating, resistance' (p. 180). I have no hesitation in saying that it provides ample evidence for its thesis: the all-pervasiveness of money as theme, form and touchstone. Taking it as an empirical inquiry into the currency of Western textuality, Marc Shell's enterprise is thoroughly demonstrative. Given the repression of that consciousness — it would be a fascinating challenge to trace the anti-tradition of money with the same subtlety and thoroughness with which the positive tradition is traced — one can go beyond acknowledging that Shell has extracted from the depths of a collective anti-conscious one of the conceptual touchstones by which both the literary and the philosophical textualities of the Occident has proceeded: he has identified one of the constitutive aporias of our thought.

The issue of consciousness, crucial in *EL*, is certainly not ignored in *MLTh*. The extremely valuable study of the *Aufhebung* in Kant and Hegel, triangulated toward the Marxist claim to surpass philosophy in its own *Aufhebung*, warns against the avoidance of such consciousness: 'the thinking which fails to account for or even to encounter its own internalization of economic form remains insensitive to a sting that goads thought into becoming philosophy and, perhaps, into surpassing it' (*MLTh*, p. 155). The discussions of Kant and Hegel, of Poe and Shakespeare, tend to align their texts with consciousness, even though this may not be a necessary conclusion to the literary analyses: a text may engage concepts and even build upon them without our being necessarily in a position to attribute 'consciousness' of that engagement either to the author or, metaphorically, to the text 'itself.'

Nevertheless, the discussions of the grail legends and of Heidegger present these texts more as cautionary examples of the inadequacy of consciousness: it is to them that the warning regarding the failure to account for the text's own generation in the money-form most readily applies. For Shell's discussions of these 'texts' stresses the unaccounted hypotheses they make, the unacknowledged and undeclared mortgaging of thought within those systems of thought. Here, rather than tracing a self-conscious critique within a text, he engages rather in a critical revelation of unconscious operations.

But perhaps the question of consciousness is ineluctably allied to that of quality: as intellectuals, we find those texts most good which seem most conscious. And vice-versa. If I find the readings of Poe and Shakespeare persuasive, it is because they seem to me to adhere to certain critical standards I find essential, and because they then imply a shared consciousness of values among the three entities in question: the text, the critic, and myself. If I am less impressed by the discussions of *Faust* and the texts of the grail legend, it is because they do not adhere to those values, in particular those of the overall structure of the text and the specificity of the concrete text. On the philosophical side, the discussion of *Aufhebung* in Kant and Hegel (particularly Kant) is extremely valuable in view of the on-going discussions in both Derridean and Marxist circles. Finally, while I can hardly pose as a judge of Heidegger, the criticism of a 'strictly apolitical theory of the counterfeit or ungenuenness' (p. 176) proceeds from a valorization of the political dimension with which I cannot help but identify myself.

If the analyses of 'The Gold Bug' and *The Merchant of Venice* seem persuasive, it is because they engage their texts first at the tropological level, that of small localized tropic encounters that inhere in such linguistic structures as metaphor and irony, and then stage further engagements with what Shell considers the larger tropes such as 'character' and 'plot.' Considering these 'tropes' seems to me erroneous, since they also occur in non-linguistic modes of semiosis, but this is largely a matter of terminology. More important is the ability to move from the small, local event of language, rhetoric or style, to the more encompassing type of narrative structure, extensively theorized by semiotics: that movement seems to me essential for any attribution of 'meaning,' 'signification,' or 'significance,' to particular texts. It is that movement which comports the recognition of structurality specific to the text: incorporating the dimension of *dispositio*, the movement shuttles along the internal dispensation of the text. That critical movement within the structurality of the text establishes the text as a specific totality, and it is that characteristic of a complex totality which produces

limitations upon the endless proliferation of meaning, whether that proliferation be thought joyful, perverse, or disastrous. Such limitation by no means leads ineluctably to single, unitary meanings: it does produce a structuration of multiple readings, or perhaps a ranking of preferred readings. A preferred reading is the one that seems more pervasive of the text's identified structures, as subject to a disposition governed by a generality not necessarily inhering in each particular, local exchange, and as subject to the text's dispensation as a polystructural entity with multiple levels and frames of reference. Suffusion produces persuasion.

This is not a radically new criterion of judgment, but it is worth repeating. One of its implicit assumptions (one of the clauses of its mortgage) is that the text exists as a discrete entity with its own organization of exchanges. When that sense of discretion is abandoned, the reading loses persuasiveness. It is that sense of the discrete totality which is missing from the chapters on *Faust* – a notoriously difficult text precisely because of its narrative, temporal, and perhaps semantic bipartitions – and on the grail legend. I will focus on the latter, partly because it happens to fall into my disciplinary specialization of medievalism, but also because it stages certain theoretical problems in a rather large and hence accessible fashion.

IV

It is the textual character of a complex totality which seems to me missing from the discussion of the grail legend, a character which is stamped on the ingot of analysis by attention to specifics. The absent specifics are both textual and historical. Shell's discourse continues a modern habit of referring to *The Middle Ages* (sometimes *The 'Late' Middle Ages*) as a unitary cultural entity. The notion of 'The Middle Ages' as a unity goes through some fairly convoluted stages, usually treated as a natural given by modernists and, it must be said, by some medievalists as well. These stages include self-serving renaissance poetic manifestoes; an eighteenth-century universalizing historiography such as Vico's, a tradition which still has its effects in the following century, as on Marx's theory of the modes of production; and the vested interests of twentieth-century churchmen and semiotizing theorists who, for different reasons, require an operative model of a society permeated by a single, unifying ideology, a refulgent presence of meaning, and this dependent on a Christian Deity. This present unity is posited for a period of which no one has any direct knowledge in spite of a plethora of concrete texts which do not readily fit into such a model: such texts are 'allegorized' or 'moralized' in total disregard of the fact

that a secular domain, comporting perhaps 95 percent of the population or more, was hard at work creating social, political, and economic orders within which clerical doctrine and values performed, at best, ornamental functions. The essential technique by which this is accomplished is the erasure of the concrete specificity of the texts, and in particular, their literal meaning, identified even by clerical hermeneutic ideology with the material, historical, and Jewish level of meaning.

Rather than address concrete, specific and discrete texts, Shell hops around from late twelfth-century texts such as Chrétien de Troyes' last romance, generally known either as the *Perceval* or the *Story of the Grail*, to Chrétien's continuators, either later at the end of the twelfth century or at the beginning of the thirteenth century; to a later thirteenth-century rewriting of the Arthurian material, including the legend of the grail, belonging to that extraordinary re-invention of prose narrative which is the Vulgate Lancelot cycle, contained in the *Quest of the Holy Grail*; the rewriting, from yet another point of view and in another language and culture, of Chrétien's story by Wolfram von Eschenbach in his *Parzival*; and finally, Wagner's musical refraction of Wolfram's story. All of this varied and variegated textuality is placed in the context of Church doctrine and the most cursory and superficial overview of socio-economic history, primarily under the guise of inadequate reference to the politics of *largesse* at the royal level, where it had been irrelevant for years and even centuries. The grail, in all these texts, is said to figure as a cornucopia, a blank check of endless provision.

The question is not whether the semantic equation of the 'grail' with the signified 'unlimited provisions' can be justified as pertaining to medieval texts (more important than the rather traditional string of early twentieth-century scholars alleged, from R.S. Loomis to Jean Marx): it can. It can, in some cases. The methodological problem – it is a problem for a historical semiotics – is whether a particular, localized occurrence of such an equation justifies the erection of a permanent, stable code presumed to be valid for *all* occurrences of the same signifier. Such a procedure is justified, of course, by the hypothesis that medieval culture is stable, unitary, and pervaded by a single, unvarying ideology. Such an assumption, operative, alas, in as intelligent and otherwise knowledgeable young scholar like Marc Shell as well as in the more doctrinaire medievalism of a D.W. Robertson, Jr., can be made to over-ride a multitude of concrete texts to the contrary, thanks to the judicious application of key cant terms like 'spiritual' (applied to 'meaning'), 'esotericism,' 'allegory,' etc. 'Meaning' is supposed to pre-exist the particular text, which becomes a mere rehearsal of truths located elsewhere, rather than the locus of a production of meaning.

Thus, Shell recognizes certain textual differentiations, but does so in a prejudicial manner: 'In the part of the [Perceval] that he completed, Chrétien merely hints at the marvelous qualities of the grail' (p.27). This phrasing implies the pre-existence of the grail as a signifying entity, along with a specific repertoire of semantic attributes. They are already established in a textual elsewhere, and Chrétien merely 'hints at' them, avoiding the complete dossier he could give us if he were so minded. Textual potentials exploited by *other* texts are retroactively assigned to the earlier text. Following the same principle but on another level, one might as well assign the 'meaning' of *King Lear* to Holinshed's *Chronicle*! One can think of only one justification for such a procedure, which is that it appears, at least, to mimic the attitude of Chrétien's medieval continuators: I wonder, though, how much of their own justificatory fiction they believed – it allowed them to make texts that were new without overtly or implicitly casting aspersions on their predecessors – when they engaged in obvious manoeuvres such as changing the import of a story element without calling their antecedent a liar!

Chrétien's textual grail – as distinguished from the semantic potentials modern scholars may find elsewhere – is more of a conundrum than a cornucopia. During the description of the strange events at the castle of the Fisher King, its passing as part of the mysterious cortège ought to function as an incitement to the young hero's question: 'What's that? Who is being served?' It does not actually produce that interrogative response, because Perceval is following social rules of etiquette inculcated in a previous episode by the male figure who represents the social status and calling that is Perceval's by birth: knighthood. But if the text – both in its patent functioning and in the commentary later supplied by Perceval's sorrowing cousin – stages the grail so that incitement to question is its expected function, it is only because it is presented as an anomalous signifier lacking a clear and present signified. The grail is staged as a semantic absence, not as a fullness, of meaning or of food. Even in the later hermit episode, it is presented, from the extra-ordinary perspective of the hermit, not at all as cornucopian. On the contrary, it contains a single host. What is remarkable is the fact that the single host is capable of sustaining – in some sense or other – a single man. If the early textual presentation of the grail (Chrétien never uses the expression of the 'holy' grail: all one can say with certainty from the text is that it functions as a serving platter) presents it as a semantic absence, the later characterization/inscription is as a paradox: a person can be sustained by so little! In neither case does the cornucopian code function for this text. Only by a prior theo-

retical or methodological decision to collapse all textual differences, indeed, to reject out of hand the very existence of texts as texts, for the entire period of 'The Middle Ages,' can such a reading be justified. In other terms, only by a gross disregard of the concrete materiality of particular texts, in favor of a 'spiritual' or 'mentalistic' content supposed, *a priori*, to inhabit the texts and to cancel their immediate meaning, can such (mis)reading operate.

Thus it is that Shell subsumes Chrétien's text, unhesitatingly, unquestioningly, to the 'Pauline economy of truth.' It may well be that that economy proves to be somewhat more complex than is assumed by his presentation (particularly in reference to a problematic of textual interpretation, the opposition of mind and matter in Paul is radical), but I will not argue that point here. It suffices for me to point out that its application to the present case eviscerates the text of its pungency and of its narrativity. Chrétien does present himself as a 'poet-sower' of course, and does so by reference to parable, but the stress on a spirituality opposed to the narrative material is entirely Shell's own:

Chrétien is a poet-sower who must consider the relationship of the fertility of his seed both to the relative *spiritual* sterility of his audience and to the material sterility of the waste-land of which he would tell them. *Spiritual* fertility varies from person to person, so that Chrétien must speak on several levels at the same time. His account of the grail thus involves an inevitable *esotericism*. (MLTn, p. 25; my italics)

The typical modernist deformation of medieval textuality is at work in this passage: it is identical with the 'sucking up effect' of the mental upon the material of contemporary theory. We supposedly all 'know' that the Middle Ages is dominated by a clerical ideology: as a result, in a Robertsonian automatism, the modern reader, eager to show his supposed historical awareness, invokes a presumed necessity on the part of the writer to impart a 'spiritual' message ... hence the instrumental necessity of the concept of 'esotericism.' Such a manoeuvre also relieves (*dispenser de*: a negative dispensation which provides relief) the modern reader and contemporary theorist of the tiresome burden of analyzing the text as a specific textual and cultural construct, according to codes that are, indeed, different from the codes operative in the world of twentieth-century textuality, and whose operation occurs at a concrete location within that complex and evolving set of structures that constituted medieval society at a turning point in the evolution of European civilization, the late twelfth century. The as-

sumption that only by satisfying that part of an audience supposedly unbled by 'spiritual fertility' with some material narrative pabulum could the writer go on to address his true audience, 'spiritually fertile,' by differentiating his text into multiple allegorical levels, so as to satisfy that eager spiritual audience's thirst for a (pre-determined) truth, is so much modernist nonsense. It also makes short shrift of the very religiosity it presumes: would not the didactic writer realize that it is precisely that part of the audience which is not athirst for religious truth that needs it? That the audience already prepared to receive a religious message is not the one a real charity must address? And that, if a serious message (religious or other) is to be imparted, it had best be imparted, not by a secret code, but through the universally perceived code of narrative?

Medieval theology has something to teach contemporary theorists besides the utility of 'allegory' to get out of a tight theoretical spot. It should be clear that I am thinking here not only of Marc Shell, but also of a more ambitious theoretical enterprise like Fredric Jameson's. The conflation of the literal level of allegory with the historical, and the consultation by Victorine scholars during the twelfth century with Jewish rabbis in order to ascertain the literal, historical meaning of the biblical text, suggests that it is in a focus on the literal, on the concrete, that theory must base itself: that is the true materiality of narrative.

Let us return to Chrétien's text. It names the one audience to which it is addressed quite specifically: Count Philip of Flanders. Nor does one need to read a scholarly work on literary patronage in the Middle Ages to understand that the writer depends on his patron, directly or indirectly: Chrétien's text playfully invokes the evangelic text and 'charity' in order to incite his patron to a greater recompense for his writerly performance than would be expected even of Alexander, the very model of generosity in medieval literary codes. The only way in which a 'spiritualistic' reading can be justified on the basis of Chrétien's Prologue is by reference to the pun of the modern French lexicographical *logue* is by reference to the pun of the modern French lexicographical item *esprit*, meaning both 'spirit' and 'wit.' Chrétien's textuality – perhaps like his Christianity, though I know far less about the latter than about the former – is very different from the radical Pauline opposition of spirit and letter. On the contrary, that radical separation of the two interpretative codes in relation to Chrétien's text – and the of the two interpretative codes in relation to Chrétien's text – and the *Perceval* Prologue in particular – merely testifies to the critic's inability to read. For the textual point of the Prologue is precisely to play with the simultaneity of the two codes, with their co-presence which keeps the material and spiritual dimensions *both* present at the same time.

The significance of starting with Jesus' parable of the sower is not to differentiate material and spiritual levels of interpretation, but to assert – as did the contemporary Victorines – that 'spirituality' inheres in the material, that a Christian charity can take the form of literary patronage. Chétiën's prologue is noteworthy, not for separating a material narrativity from a spiritual signification and opposing them, but for (re)uniting them: playfully, the writer conjoins the codes of Christian charity and feudal materialism, by making it the Count's virtue to pay his writer his economic due.

I like the fact that Shell plays with the ambiguity of the phrase in which Chrétien refers to his text – the *conte del grial* – by translating it as the *Account of the Grail*: like *conter*, its cognate *account* bears both narrative and financial senses. (The significance of this pun is dubious, however: the titles of medieval works are more modern inventions. There does not seem to have existed a titular convention: a proper name of the work cited at its beginning.) I also think that the stress on barter-exchanges is not only entirely justified, but that it is, if anything, somewhat too limited: Chrétien's narratives are based on exchanges of which the barter of material objects represent only the most obvious form of exchange. More important is the exchange of values, which are sometimes borne by concrete objects, sometimes not. Values are also produced by narrative labour: values also appear, sometimes, 'out of the blue', i.e., without the text specifying just how they are produced, though their attribution is normally an exchange. It is through these narrative exchanges and through the smaller semantic exchanges or transformations that we call tropes that the text, even the medieval text, produces its meaning(s), not through the invocation of a code whose relation to the individual text is purely aleatory.

The modern deformation of the medieval text by its 'spiritualization' proceeds by disregarding the complex totality that is the individual, concrete text: by its dematerialization. The same process occurs in the effort – in itself entirely serious and highly praiseworthy – to provide a dialectical view of the text by setting it in relation to 'history', i.e., to the contemporary developments in the domains of economics, politics and social hierarchy. The grail tales are juxtaposed with various developments in the ideological sphere: with dogma (the Pauline economy of truth); with a supposed transition from an ideology of royal largesse to two competing ideologies of charity and of a democratic merchantly dealing in exchange; with a transition from economic realism to economic nominalism, 'in which the signifying *intellectus* was given greater emphasis than the material *res*.' A single materialistic note is struck when the aristocracy is presented as impoverished and the

counts as centers of wastelands; that is the only element from the socio-economic and political dimension of life that seems relevant to the discussion of the literary texts: as we will see, it is factually wrong. But this was also a period in which, as I have already pointed out, the Victorines consulted rabbis in order to ascertain the historical, material and specifically Jewish level of the biblical text, since all further Christian interpretation had to be based on a correct understanding of that first and material level: the forefront of hermeneutic discussion thus stressed, if not the unity, then the interdependence of the material and spiritual levels of textuality. But this was also the period in which the merchantry, rather than acting in a democratic manner which would announce, at least in practice, our own ideology, rather aped the limited equality to be found in feudal councils: in the communes and other towns of the period, it was a very small group of leading burgher families that established control over the growing urban poor (displaced from the countryside), the apprentices, the journey-men, the other burghers of lesser resources and power, and the unemployed. But this was also a period in which the merchantry was associated with feudal structures in other ways, such as the continuing series of fairs in Champagne – really adding up to one nearly year-long locus of international exchange – which were instituted and protected by feudal intervention, organization, and (above all) the provision of police protection. But this was also a period in which the ideology of royal largesse had long been irrelevant, particularly in the cultural domain where it was the nobility that supported cultural activity. Above all, this was a period in which the counts were hardly the centers of wastelands. Quite to the contrary, the Counts of Champagne and Flanders – the two patrons for whom Chrétien de Troyes worked successively – were among that handful of feudal eminences who constructed major feudal principalities, transforming the scattered and disparate châtellenies of the earlier feudal period into powerful political and economic units that ranked in size between the individual castle and the modern nation-state: the agricultural labour of the peasantry, policed by the lower-level knights ennobled at the turn of the century, and the increased commercial exchanges of the growing burgher class, ultimately worked to the profit of this small, upper bracket of the feudal aristocracy. Even the eventual imposition of renewed royal authority under Philip Augustus had to be based on the wealth produced within the Île-de-France, the king's familial domain *as a feudal noble*.

The fact is that, certainly during the twelfth century and probably earlier as well (the general tendency today is to view the twelfth-century renaissance as firmly rooted in the eleventh century), a large variety

of human activities were carried out with no reference to the ideological values of the institutionalized church, or with only surface obedience. Thus, at a period where dogma insisted on condemning not only the merchantry but usury, not only secular Christian lords but even princes of the Church lent out money for profit (which is the meaning of 'usury' for the Middle Ages). At a time when the Church continued to condemn merchants from the pulpit, these merchants successfully developed complicated systems of financial accounting, allowing them, for instance, to complete financial settlements at the end of a fair of several weeks' duration without actually carrying gold or other specie across the face of the continent. International banking and paper credit were invented at this time. This invention extended the distance between the monetary signifier and its signified, a distance that had already become important as the result of two simultaneities: the development of increased commerce, but the continuing quantitative insufficiency of specie, especially silver: hence the increased use of purely paper reckoning, without the use of actual coinage or paper money. The complex financial instruments devised for both local and international commerce, readily documented for thirteenth-century Italian cities but for which the evidence is mostly indirect in the case of the French twelfth century, extended a principle of semiotic separation that was already current in everyday life and trade and anticipated by some eight centuries the dematerialization of electronic transfers. A dialectical view of history would probably want to juxtapose this flotation of signification with its political analogue, the separation of the grant of the feudal fief from the concrete services against which that grant was originally exchanged. These concrete knightly services tended to be commuted into money payments during the twelfth century. Again, the material basis of signification and its 'meaning' were loosened: the point is particularly relevant to a book concerned with exchanges because the fief was the basic unit of production. Originally agricultural, this production tended more and more to become monetary at this period. Production was being transformed from direct use in which services as well as goods could be directly bartered, to the transposition of value from goods into specie, and the further exchange of specie for land grant (to both peasantry and the knight). Such a dialectical view of history might arrange this much abbreviated presentation of evidence that is inherently complex and perhaps even contradictory, into a historical pattern such as the following. A semiosis in which signification was seen to be guaranteed by a divine cosmological order which had established the reign of truth and meaning forever was undermined, especially in the eleventh and twelfth cen-

turies, by major withdrawals from established semiotic codes: the fief no longer signified personal service, but could be farmed out so as to produce species-revenue as its production of meaning; history was no longer identified with a predetermined set of values represented simultaneously by social structure and a historical evolution that was seen primarily to reassert those same values, but incorporated profound changes in social structure and other social phenomena (e.g., the extraordinary development of towns), so that its significance had to be studied in the materiality of history itself. Vernacular literature of the eleventh and twelfth centuries was largely devoted to establishing a domain in which secular ideology could be developed, signalling an adherence to clerical values so broad as to leave apparently undisturbed the clerisy's claim to ideology as its monopolistic domain while in fact exploring rather adventurously new potentials for symbolic ideological development. Such an ideological adventure, which can hardly be expected to be fully conscious of what it is doing, proceeds hesitatingly and uncertainly, *par tâtonnement*. Unlike a proper commercial contract, the hypothesis of such an adventure does not recognize all the clauses it bears implicitly. The textual production of such a cultural position is unlikely to be characterized by simple, uniform ideological points of view; on the contrary, such texts will probably exhibit varied and strange contradictions, incorporating both 'realistic' and 'fantastic' elements. Simple-minded views of history and of ideology, of cultural production, views that reduce textual production either to our own standards of 'literature' or its reverse side, are most likely to be inadequate.

The above sketch is not proposed as an exclusive and certain interpretation of the historical evidence. On the contrary, the only status it can claim, being exhibited so briefly and with so little supporting material, is an appearance of possible correctness: it is a hypothesis worth considering, nothing more (for the moment). If it is a hypothesis worth considering, however, it is because as history, it bears the same fundamental characteristics as the account of Chrétien's *Perceval*: it aims at the representation of a complex totality whose inner workings are assumed to be located below the evidentiary surface and to be, to some extent, contradictory. It attempts to incorporate the same kind of distanciation between 'matter' and 'inscription' that Shell traces in *MLTh*, under the aegis of a shift from coin to paper money and then to electric money; to identify the process in the ideational domain in general, as does Shell, but also to present that as part of a larger shift that has economic, social, and political dimensions as well. Any historical interpretation of literature or texts which does not, in its account,

render these characteristics of both the texts and the history in question, seems to me flawed and inadequate. It is only when the historical dimension is taken by the literary or textual scholar as seriously as the literary that the two series can be placed in a relation of dialectical exchange.

V

To return to the question with which we opened this piece: the interest of 'money' as the central code for the interpretation of texts was the dualism it shares with the textual activities to which it is posed as analogue, as well as the fact that it operates in both the superstructural realm of the mind and the material realm of commercial exchange and is thereby inscribed in the processes of production and consumption. Shell claims that money is a better code than 'literature,' which is probably true given the ideological pretensions of post-Kantian aesthetics, abstracting the activity designated as literature from the material, a gesture continued by the relegation of the arts to a non-materialistic super-structural sphere. In this context, to say that money is more apt as a central code to trace this constitutive occidental opposition of mind and matter is largely tautological. I do not think the same argument can be made if we substitute for the term 'literature' the semiotic concept of 'text,' whose concreteness can much more readily be seen as social and political. Nevertheless, that is not an argument I wish to pursue now. For the present issue is not the term 'literature' but its momentary opposite, 'money.' The dualism of money, which is the reason for choosing it originally, is its imbrication in the two domains mentioned. But that privileged position is diminished when one part of the code's duality is given short shrift. It is not the fact that Shell's discussion of a medieval group of texts, and his effort to constitute one particular interpretative code on the basis of those texts, happens to be inadequate: that is merely par for the course as played by modernists, who have little sense of the specific alterities of the Middle Ages or a real understanding of how, nevertheless, medieval textuality stages, to an extraordinary degree, a contemporary textual problematic. The weakness of this one chapter is anomalous: those on Poe, Shakespeare, the *Aufhebung*, and Heidegger, seem to me far more successful as elucidations of particular texts. But in all cases, the reference to the domain of the social, the political, the economic, tends to be brief and cursory. At the same time that Shell proposes 'money' as the crucial code to crack the significance and semiosis of past (and present: his eye for contemporary relevance is sharp), he reduces the effectiveness of the operation by abscission of the material. The realm

of matter, while frequently enough mentioned and summarized, is treated in such a manner that its obdurate resistance (the character which makes 'money' such a worthwhile tracer among the thinkers) is, as it were, flattened and overridden.

In fact, Shell's work shares an essential characteristic with much modern theory. Materiality is not so much an effective resistance inscribed within the text as it is an easy *representation* within the domain of textuality. As a result, it is not as a connecting code between mind and matter that money functions, as it is a kind of super-code dominating the exchanges between two textual codes, the code of mind and the code of matter, both within the ideational domain. An opposition that started off as constitutive and fundamental has been sucked up into one of the original terms. This is as far from an *Aufhebung* as a dialectical thinker wants to get.

In a sense, this cannot be a criticism of a particular body of work. On the contrary, to note this aporia is to recognize that this particular body of work is located, in fact, at the forefront of contemporary semiotics, taking that term, again, as indicating a broad field of inquiry and exploration. The neo-Kantian epistemology which is the heritage of the best and most self-conscious semiotics, abuts an ineluctable limit of discourse when it attempts to deal, not with historicity as a concept or a principle of textual elaboration — as exemplified by Hayden White — but with history as the domain of the concrete, the material, the structural materiality which moves social formations in their economic and political processes. That is the domain to which both history and literature were thought to *refer* in an earlier dispensation. With the interruption of that referential function that followed the Saussurean insistence that linguistics must have its own, discrete object, the operation of the language system, a screen has dropped on contemporary theoretical reflection, cutting off the reach of language toward whatever is not language. As contemporary thought reaches toward what the domain of theory would be *about*, that domain recedes: thought chasing matter repulses it simultaneously. Hence two characteristics of the present moment. First, the concept 'representation' finds renewed importance within a theory that rejects mimetism and the referent. Secondly, the renewed interest in new forms of Marxist thought, since it is Marxism that has most consistently explored the possible relations between thought and social reality, and which, today, does so in a far more subtle and supple manner than heretofore. Contemporary theory thus hesitates between dual imperatives: to limit its purview to those objects which are properly its own proprietary objects, an imperative supported both by the desire for disciplinary

specificity and by the limitations implicit in the structuration of the ideological state apparatuses; and to obey the intellectual and structuralist imperative to engage its Other, namely the realm of material history that defines oppositionally its own status as mental production. Let me stress that this hesitation is *necessary*. No maps showing the way out of the gulch of aporia are readily available: it will take careful plotting and intellectual manoeuvring to figure out the specifics of a way out that satisfies the multitudinous requirements under which we operate. Alternatively, the entire problem might be tossed out by some migratory intellectual wave, similar to the barbarian invasions of the Late Empire, which overturn an established episteme without even acknowledging its existence. If that happens, though, it will not be the work of any reader of these words: it will occur in another dimension altogether. For that reader and for myself, a more subtle and complex approach is required.

While hesitation remains necessary, so does production. What is required is a kind of licensing, an enablement of the production which participates in the hesitation by remaining uncertain whether it is a step in the right direction or a form of temporization: a present move cognizant of its inherent presentness, and of the fact that that presentness may be its only ontological claim. That present move is what I think of as the *qua*-litative gesture. It consists in recognizing the alterity of that domain external to the linguistic form of the mental, and the ensuing recession of the material before the approaches of the mental. The concern of a chastened semiotics is not with 'matter' *per se* (the domain, possibly, of physics, biology, and various forms of engineering), but with the significance that the material obtains when seen from the perspective of the textual, when 'taken as' an element of the textual. Recognizing that this is only a partial perspective — and a hazardous one, for the realm of material history pulls us toward its profound alterity — we know, first, that it is unknowable as any putative 'essence,' and secondly, that its putative essence is certainly unknowable to us as explorers starting in the domain of textuality. It is crucial to retain this ambiguity: both the tug toward the Other's alterity, and the inevitability of our own partiality. For the requirement on a semiotics reaching toward history is a balancing act. The balancing act requires finding a mid-point in the rhetorical deployment of the totalizing vision of history and the totalizing vision of the text. In other words, an immediate issue is that of all rhetoric: the pragmatic relation to the audience.

But the balancing act requires more. It is all very well to assert and deploy alterities, but a staging of entities that are exclusively present-

ed as alterities will establish only a dialogue of the deaf: entities constituted exclusively as alterities to each other remain two unconnected series. It is only when an identity can be posited of them that interchange is possible, that comparison and dialectical subsumption is possible. In semiotic terms, one does not have two contrary terms until a semantic category has been posited. What is that semantic category? It is a category that Marx wrote about, and did so extensively. Yet, though Shell often refers to Marx's texts, and does so as one who knows them well, he never cites the concept that would appear to present the semantic category common to semiotics on the one hand, and to any semiotic perspective on the relationship between texts and social paradigms: the concept of value.

VI

The conflation of previously differentiated bits of semantic content into a newly instituted concept — even if it is the reversal of a historical development toward greater analyticity, it figures as the creation, at its time, of a new *porte-manteau* word — is one of the more striking features of our intellectual life: as suggested earlier, it figures most prominently in Derrida's work. Such conflation is not to be taken as a simple, horizontal, binary operation: presumably, it is offered as part of a dialectical process in which earlier distinctions (division of a whole into parts is one of the primordial characteristics of dialectics as philosophical method) are both surpassed and yet somehow retained: not only the cancellation of the debt, but retention of evidence that the debt has been paid. This has normally proceeded by appeal to etymology, e.g., the word and concept of the *pharmakon*, in a procedure that cannot but remind the medievalist of the similar tactic, oft-ridiculed by earlier twentieth-century scholars, of Isidore of Seville. The major conflation in Shell's work (operated without reference to etymology) attempts to recompose three elements distinguished in the earlier tradition: *money*, as a particular kind of semiosis, both as the object of a new numismatics and as the *Geld des Geistes*, to use the phrase Shell takes over from Marx; *exchange*, primarily as a commercial process involving money, but also as applied to the semantic transformations traditionally identified under the name of 'tropes'; and the dimension which is the primary materiality in the Marxist tradition, that of the *production* of material life. This new, tripartite unity is, I take it, what Shell means by 'matter' in the fundamental opposition of matter and the mental. Insofar as this move sets into relation entities which the supposedly 'humanistic' tradition of Western thinking has artificially separated so as to occlude the ideological significance of the three

separate entities, and their relation to the mental domain, it is a most welcome intellectual gesture, one that rejoins a major movement in contemporary theory at this moment. The established hermeticism of the intellectual and literary life from the social and political dimensions is becoming increasingly tenuous. Shell's achievement within this current is a major one by a younger scholar in the United States.

While the general direction of his work seems to me entirely admirable as well as indicative of the shape of things to come, there remains the more technical set of questions raised by the theoretical relationship between the terms of such a conflation of money, exchange, and production: is conflation an identification of the previously disparate? if not, what precisely are the terms of relationship? are they equally interdependent? is one (are two) of the terms more basic than the other(s)? The difficulty is that the relevant concepts overlap. Certainly commerce (exchange based on money) is the primary mode of exchange (the *dispositif* of exchange) under the capitalist dispensation, but exchange also includes a multitude of events that are not commercial at all and which therefore lead to considerations quite other than money and commerce. Exchange is also an anthropological category, and applies to a variety of non-commercial phenomena and objects such as gifts, women, and, in Shell's own text, of the semantic contents of textual tropes. Similar questions arise in relation to production. The contemporary production line is certainly as interdependent with the category of exchange as Henry Ford's, especially when one considers the practices of international corporations which organize partial systems of production in different locations in different nations, and have to provide a pattern of financial exchange among the productive units (and hence among different countries) to make the totality of the production chain possible. But again, while the relevance to each other of the concepts of production and exchange is undoubted, that is not the same as asserting their identity. Again, the categories overlap, each including or 'covering' phenomena that are quite different. And when the term of discourse or semiosis is introduced, more differences are produced. While money does produce a kind of 'vertical' or quantitative valorization that also occurs in our value-judgments in discourse, it cannot by itself produce the variety of use-values that are inherent in language and narrative. Discourse incorporates exchange in the semantic dimensions of tropes, but no one has made the claim that such tropic exchanges have the *same* kind of leverage in the social, political, and economic domain as does money (which is far from denying the effectivity of ideology upon the social formation). The similarities of money and discourse, even on the structural level, do

not lead to the reduction of either to the other: the terms of their relationships as differences are not defined. What does seem fairly certain is that, insofar as 'money' is the name of Shell's master code, its useful functioning in his work – its power to reveal things we did not know before – probably depends upon its alterity, as code, to the other codes concerned, that is the dialecticality of his achievement.

The problem is not a new one. It has been faced most cogently, as far as I know, within a certain Marxist tradition which attempts to allow for relatively independent specificities within an overall sense of totality: the tradition of Gramsci, Althusser, and Poulantzas. The means by which this dualism is coordinated is a concept which is abhorrent to the consciousness of much contemporary American thought, both in literary theory and in the post-New-Left political tradition: the concept of hierarchy. Bemused by its political incorporations in ancient aristocracies, modern Stalinism and Fascism, and the logocentrism of the Western philosophical tradition, most contemporary theoreticians, whether of literary theory or of political analysis and action, have rejected its analytic potential. But one of its meaningful functions is to reconcile the claims to specificity of individual human activities with the claim of the larger, totalizing structure, whether this is social, political or semiotic. To take a minor example, outside the sphere of literature: double-entry bookkeeping is invented in the twelfth century, and remains a current practice in the twentieth. That identity through and remains a current practice in the twentieth. That identity through eight centuries testifies to the (relative) independence of the practice, and even the relative autonomy of the institution which incorporates that practice of accountancy, namely banking. That the concrete practice remains largely identical to itself over an eight-century span does not mean, however, that the institution of banking remains unchanged over the same time span, either in terms of its own internal organization or in its relation to external social structures. To up the ante a bit, both double-entry bookkeeping and international banking testify to the existence, in the French and Italian twelfth and thirteenth centuries, of the profit motive, which in some important ways has to be thought of as operating in the Middle Ages in much the same ways as it does today. Nevertheless, no one will deny that, in spite of this (partial) identity, what are generally called the 'feudal' and the 'capitalist' societies are importantly different. The only argument can come as to which trait – identity or difference – is more important: that is an argument as to the hierarchical relationship of the two traits in question. What is hopefully fairly obvious is that the two notions (identity and difference) are interdependent, that both must be brought into play to account for the entities in question, and that at some stage of the

discussion, the issue of their relative priority or precedence must be considered. The thought of the totality and the thought of the local are ultimately interdependent: without the avowed concept of a totality, some partial entity eventually takes over, *de facto*, the dominant function within the totality. Such a *de facto* shift in dominance means that the issues of balance between the local and the total, and the 'political' dimension of the issue, cannot be discussed overtly.

The difficulty is that there is not available today a sense of the totality which the individual thinker can accept, whether we are talking about the whole of the social formation, or that of its parts we call 'culture' or even that part of culture we call 'literature.' Indeed, disbelief in totality has become doctrine in some quarters, romanticizing the immediate, the local, with its appearances of certainty and tangibility – appearances that are ideological. In this respect, theory (particularly French theory) is replaying, wittingly or not, the moves of the student movement of the sixties, with its reliance on local control and self-determination. What was ignored at the time was the truth expressed pungently by a sociologist friend during the occupation of the buildings at Columbia University during the spring of 1968: 'You can't have a revolution in one institution only.' What ensuing history has further demonstrated is that even reform within one institution or one group of institutions will be 'corrected' by the structurality of the whole. Thus also, the various cultural avant-garde movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have been allowed their splash, only to be recuperated by their appurtenance to a systematicity that is far more durable than their often heroic effort. In the theoretical domain which is our main concern at the moment, the semantic conflation of local concepts such as money, exchange, language and (by implication) thought cannot work dialectically unless the concepts are subject to an *Aufhebung*, a subsumption into some higher theoretical entity that allows for their (modified and limited) retention even as some more general, i.e., hierarchically superior, concept is introduced that can function in the place designated by their juxtaposition and (partial) overlap. Dialectics and hierarchy are interdependent notions: they are opposed only if hierarchy is taken to be static and unchangeable. In other words, the sense of the total, of the whole, is necessary for the understanding and existence of the part, as partiality. You can't have one without the other.

The fact that no generally acceptable theory of the social whole is available today has two effects (among others). One is the necessity of working hesitantly and incompletely, with presumed parts, in a manner which must remain incomplete even as it works toward a presumed

sense of the totality. This is not at all the same as doing 'empirical' research as the basis for some later, overarching hypothesis to be 'proved' and installed as doctrine, though it may eventually work out that way. For the present situation, unlike the empirical dispensation, cannot specify even 'where' a unifying entity is to be found, whereas the empirical dispensation located that principle in the domain of Nature. The closest we have to that type of 'location' is the necessity of engaging with those theories of the past, those past theories, that recognized the inevitable interdependence of part and whole. Such engagement is necessary first in order to disengage our own starting point, a process Althusser identified when he argued that 'science' always starts with 'ideology': 'science' is merely the name for present knowledge wrested from older certainties with whatever rigour and discipline is possible. The necessity we are pointing to is that of a necessary supersession, both temporal and intellectual. The major figure here is clearly Marx, who figures frequently in Shell's pages: indeed, the trope of 'the coin of the mind' is a translation of Marx's phrase, *das Geld des Geistes*. But while Marx figures frequently and importantly in these pages, what seems to be his essential argument for their project is strangely absent. For if there is a concept which can provide an *Aufhebung* of money, language and thought, which can account for their intersections, it is to be found in the conjunction of those pages of *Capital* which deal with 'value' and contemporary developments in semantics and semiotics which also deal with 'value,' completing parts of Marx's discussion in remarkably congruent ways. Marx's labour theory of economic value is admittedly argued and arguable, but that is perhaps not the crucial aspect of his theory of value for our concerns (though it might be interesting to juxtapose the labour theory of value with Eco's theory of sign production in the second major part of his *Theory of Semiotics* [1976]). It is difficult to see how an economy of literature that would set into relation the processes of signification and valorization operating in the domains of money, language and thought can possibly advance further without a direct engagement with Marx's thought on the key issue of value. For example, one lesson *Capital* can teach contemporary theory, obsessed as it is with logical aporias, is how a theory of matter and value can incorporate such aporetic structures at a local level and still retain its explicatory power. Marc Shell's discussion of the *Aufhebung* will be crucially important here, including both the sections on Kant and on Hegel.

Even more important, Marx's text can serve as a counterweight to a dominant tendency in contemporary theory. In a conceptualization that starts self-consciously from the fundamental opposition of matter

and thought, there is a quite natural tendency for the second term of that binarism to overwhelm the first. If under a former dispensation of empiricism the theoretical vanished under the guise of transparency and subordination to the order of external facts, theory has taken its revenge now by asserting its own constitutive role and relegating its opposite term, 'matter,' to the subordinate rank of an element on the screen of mental representation. As noted earlier, it is not matter itself with which theory deals today, but only the *representations* of the material world as they pass on the screen of the mind, conscious or unconscious. The epistemological basis for this withdrawal is both widely known and remains cogent. It can no longer simply be tossed out in favor of some more pragmatically comfortable account of our abilities to know. It is precisely those who argue most strongly the limits of our ability to know who have renewed the knowledge and understanding of textuality most profoundly in our time. But it is also time, perhaps, to note its obvious inadequacy. Just as Heisenberg's principle of indeterminacy has not precluded further research in physics, but has demanded that its observation of epistemological limitations be accounted for in further research, so the similar sense of epistemological limitations in the field of textuality cannot prevent us from engaging the necessity of knowing a world external and sometimes inimical to us, of both controlling it and submitting to it as well. Such dual relations of control and submission to ecological principle undoubtedly will determine our survivability in the physical universe. Here, Marx is a model of an admittedly limited self-consciousness in its engagement of theory with the externality of theory. Insofar as our thought remains constituted by the matter-mind opposition, Shell's achievement is to have largely prepared us to engage that body of thought which, in modern times, most successfully negotiated that opposition in the dialectical *Aufhebung*, enabling a return to the idea that thought, even in the guise of philosophy, might exist in order to change the world.

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