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REVIEW

Realism's Forms

IAN DUNCAN

Elaine Freedgood, *Worlds Enough: The Invention of Realism in Victorian Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019)

Anna Kornbluh, *The Order of Forms: Realism, Formalism, and Social Space* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019)

NOT to mince words: everyone seriously interested in Victorian fiction should read the newest books by Elaine Freedgood and Anna Kornbluh—and preferably read them together, as I've read them for this review. *Worlds Enough* and *The Order of Forms* mount sharp, polemical, hugely stimulating arguments about the basic categories, form and realism, that structure their topic. A side-by-side reading highlights radical differences between the two in their conception and use of those categories, as well as their shared political commitment to a criticism that reaches beyond tearing down received pieties to elicit alternative ways of imagining and inhabiting what we take to be the real world.

Several years ago, in *The Antinomies of Realism*, Fredric Jameson reckoned with the bewildering range of definitions, connotations, and associations attached to realism, "a hybrid concept, in which an epistemological claim (for knowledge or truth) masquerades as an aesthetic ideal, with fatal consequences for both of these incommensurable dimensions."[1] That the epistemological claim carries with it political and ethical claims further muddies the water. Jameson's new account of realism as a structuring dialectic between narration and affect does not appear to have redefined general usage, at least not yet, richly generative as it is for thinking about the relation between narrative and other modes

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(lyric, dramatic, ekphrastic) that the novel seeks to absorb as it expands its cultural reach in the nineteenth century. Meanwhile, the range of more recent approaches (and I can only gesture at a few of them here) attests to realism's ongoing conceptual vitality. I'll limit myself to noting two related tendencies. Both depart from the mimetic conception of realism as a description of the world as it appears before us, the signatures of which include (in Audrey Jaffe's handy summary) "metonymy; the use of the detail; an emphasis on the empirical and the visual; the idea of disillusionment and that of consensus."[2] One tendency radically enlarges description's scope by playing on the technical capacity of aesthetic genres—poetry as well as fiction—to intuit immanent forms of reality that, while felt, exceed cognition and (hence) referential accounting, as in Raymond Williams's "structures of feeling"; Lauren Goodlad, adapting Williams, calls this mode "subjunctive realism."[3] The excess consists in sublime, unprecedented expansions of geographical and demographic scale that confound the sovereign categories of individual experience and the nation-state, such as the global economic and governmental circuits of empire and the onset of biopolitical forms of mass life.[4]

A second tendency breaks more decisively away from description to reconceive realism as an aspiration, an action—an imaginary making or remaking of what counts as real. Recent work in this vein, including the two books under review, shares with the work just mentioned an impetus to reverse the moral program of disillusionment and consensus listed by Jaffe as among realism's effects. Reiterated in influential criticism of the 1980s,[5] that program has deep roots in eighteenth-century apologies for the novel, which founded the new genre on the repudiation of romance, a shadow-fiction freighted with false consciousness and bad desire. Jaffe neatly upends the program with the claim that realism enacts a fulfillment of fantasy rather than its renunciation: realist novels "represent not the real but the desire for it, and in doing so render it desirable for readers."[6] Further refining a logic of therapeutic disenchantment, Grace Lavery finds realist fiction sharing with psychoanalysis the task of persuading its subjects "to relinquish a beautiful fantasy and face a discomforting truth about the inadequacy of their own material existence," by making the latter—"the possible"—"after all, desirable": not by accepting that inadequate material existence as fixed and settled, but by reimagining the conditions of its possibility—in the cases of Sigmund Freud and George Eliot, "[reorienting] through technique the subject's relation to the sexual body."[7]

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This double turning of the realist program—renouncing fantasy for the real, reconstituting the real as a better (a more real) fantasy—takes us to the books under review. Elaine Freedgood and Anna Kornbluh both view the novel as a project of multiple world-making: "the production of possible worlds" via "a speculative projection of hypothetical social space, where 'social space' signals the medium of collective life" (Kornbluh 121, 30); the generation of "a seemingly infinite number of worlds" that readers "can imagine, and thereby inhabit" (Freedgood xiii, xv). Combining the key terms "form" and "realism" in quite different ways, Freedgood and Kornbluh assign them different roles in the world-making project—different enough that it may not, after all, be the same project. Formal realism denotes the abstract reality principle—the principle of form *as* abstraction—that underwrites the projection of possible social realities for Kornbluh. For Freedgood, "classical realism" ("the ur-form of the novel") is an ideological confection, set up by critics rather than by novelists themselves, that "keeps people in their place" (ix)—occupying the position, in other words, once occupied by romance. Proposing "to unthink novel history and restore the full oddness of the nineteenth-century novel" (ix), Freedgood displaces the (drama-based, Aristotelian) ideal of "integrated, coherent, and conservative" form, installed in modern novel theory by Henry James, for a vision of novelistic form that is "ragged and broken in its diegetic dispersion of a coherent world" through operations of metaleptic "rupture" (xvi). Kornbluh, in contrast, finds in James's allegorical "house of fiction" a positive model for how "realist form works to produce an integrated world" (33). Both James and (the early) Georg Lukács posit "architecture—the deliberate building of social space"—as paradigmatic for how "true realism inheres in the integrality of every aspect of the composition" (47).

The difference I am highlighting, between form as building and form as breaking, may be more nominal than real: as a figure for potential, as-yet-unrealized spaces of sociality, "architecture ruptures" rather than fixes, in Kornbluh's account (42); while metalepsis is the technique that "[establishes] multiple worlds," in Freedgood's (104). Freedgood's view of the utopian charge of this world-making is more muted and mixed than Kornbluh's—more oriented to practical, institutional questions of the history and state of our disciplinary practice, in which the political comes to bear on the politics of canonicity, of which novels get taught and studied as well as read, and how. Kornbluh's alignment of formal realism with political formalism, on the basis of their common abstraction of social relationality, affords a more abstract conception—

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triangulated via nineteenth-century mathematical formalism—not only of form but also of the political, and hence a purer utopianism: a sufficient attention to novelistic form will cultivate the capacity to reimagine social forms, to reimagine the form of society as such.

Freedgood's earlier book *The Ideas in Things* accomplished a deft undoing of realism by its own premise, in one of the most audacious challenges to our reading protocols to have appeared in recent years.[8] Radicalizing realism's referential claim, *The Ideas in Things* reanimates the histories of economic and social production buried in the objects that furnish the scenery of nineteenth-century novels. With their cargo of exploitation and violence made newly legible, those histories overwrite the fictions that once absorbed them, collapsing the boundaries of the book as a material object as well as of the literary work's imagined world. *Worlds Enough* generalizes this critical method under the flag of metalepsis (a term not used in *The Ideas in Things*), in Gérard Genette's sense of a work's transgression of its narrative frame: "the historical breaks into the fictional, an epigraph disturbs the text it is both inside and outside of, and the world in which the telling takes place interrupts the world of which we are being told" (Freedgood, xvi). Rhetorically overt in British fiction before and after the nineteenth century, as well as beyond the soi-disant French and English mainstream, these metaleptic operations are viewed, early on, as proof of the Victorian novel's failure to meet classical standards of formal unity and coherence, realized in the exemplary realist art of Flaubert and then James. When academic criticism upgrades the Victorian novel into a respectable object of study (via structuralist and poststructuralist narrative theory) in the 1970s and '80s, it shrink-wraps it into "a (mostly) sealed off diegesis with an omniscient narrator in an extradiegetic layer and ourselves outside the whole contraption" (84)—stifling the unruly interaction between the fiction and its outsides, the text's imagined world and ours, which is the source of its critical energy.

Case studies in *Worlds Enough* also track the secret histories of objects across and beyond the texts that name them, from ballast (shipboard stuff that already allegorizes itself as the matter—sheer mass—that precedes and exceeds allegory) to birdlife (the exotic ornithology of empire). The exercise is encouraged by the current tectonic shift of our reading to online platforms, a technological undoing of the bound volume of the book. Freedgood chases those birds across notes attached to the novels by their authors and then editors, since metalepsis accommodates the literary as well as object-world phenomena that straddle and

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muddle the boundary between a diegesis and its outside. These range from epigraphs and other local paratextual devices ("bibliographic metalepsis: the infinite library that lurks in the margins of the text, and sometimes breaks through them" [77]) to the spooky global immanence of the omniscient narrator, alternately hovering above or behind the story-world and looming into it. Switching off its naturalizing spell, Freedgood shows us how weird the convention is.

This set of specific operations articulates a more fundamental antinomy between fiction and reference, which turns out to be the AC generator driving novelistic discourse. The fourth of the case-study chapters in *World Enough*, "Hetero-Ontologicality," brings this argument to a head. The realist novel's "twin commitments to fictionality and reference" constitute the ur-rupture, or arche-metalepsis, that realism seeks to cover up (99):

> Every sentence in which a fictional character traverses an actual city or an actual poet has dinner with a fictional character or an actual war is observed or fought in by a fictional character is a rupture of enormous existential proportions. That such ruptures do not feel like ruptures may be the most significant thing about them. (100)

Such ruptures are as old as fiction itself, which may be why we do not register them. (Genette adapted the term "metalepsis" from the rhetoric handbook; Friedrich Schlegel's earlier name for the device, "parabasis," refers to the frame-breaking moments in Aristophanic comedy when characters step out of their roles to address the audience. Ancient Greek drama is full of such effects, from the intervention of gods in the human world of household and city to the shifting mediation of the chorus, alternately playing characters within the scene and standing back from it to relay commentary to the audience.) It is through the largely unconscious processing of metalepsis that our imaginations are able to "establish multiple worlds in which to imagine the fictional and the referential" and, thanks to realism, "[do] so in a way we have come to experience as seamless, as realistic" (103). The ruse is made a crux in the seemingly anomalous microgenre of the Victorian ghost story. The story's strategic irresolution of the ghost-seeing event between belief and disbelief, suspending its reader between incompatible realities, stages the essential operation of fiction "that realism tried and tries to naturalize" (126).

Freedgood dissolves the exceptionalism of Victorian high realism to return it to the wide, global and transhistorical, horizontal but far from

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even field of the novel as such—or of fiction as such, since any work of fiction has to be readable in relation to a referential base from which it differs. Victorian novels are notorious, of course, for their massive rhetorical amplification of that base, loading it with metonymic detail, even as some display rather than disguise their fictional operations, making the antinomy analyzed by Freedgood more or less conspicuous. Metalepsis, along with other signatures of fictionality (violations of probability such as blatant plot coincidences or deus-ex-machina interventions, overtly symbolic events, patterns, and characters), is flexed more flamboyantly in Dickens's novels than in Trollope's (although those devices are at work there too), or in Walter Scott's novels more than in Jane Austen's, so that a genealogy of Victorian realism routed through Scott might yield us a view of the field closer to the one offered by Freedgood. (The antinomy between fiction and reference, of which history is an ideologically strong case, is the defining topos of Scott's "classical form of the historical novel," as reviewers complained in the day.)[9]

Several of the recent accounts of realism elide formal and generic distinctions within the general field of Victorian fiction, making realism (in effect) a totalizing principle, synonymous with "the Victorian novel" itself—if there can be said to be such a thing. *Bleak House* (1853), *Middlemarch* (1872), and *The Way We Live Now* (1875) all exemplify the liberal operation of "high realism" in Amanda Anderson's *Bleak Liberalism*.[10] Other accounts continue to find traction in those formal distinctions. Goodlad, Jaffe, and Emily Steinlight all cast sensation fiction as realism's mid-Victorian critical antagonist: Goodlad and Jaffe offer Wilkie Collins's *Armadale* (1866) as a case study, with Goodlad attending to modal contrasts within sensation fiction (between *Armadale* and *The Moonstone* [1868]) as well as within so-called classical realism (Trollope); while Steinlight tracks sensational eruptions, destabilizing realist protocol, in *Daniel Deronda* (1876).[11] Up until the 1970s Dickens was routinely excluded from realist canons, on mimetic grounds of contrived plots and flat characters rather than because of rogue metalepsis—even though the dual narrative in *Bleak House* may constitute the most flagrant, sustained metalepsis in all Victorian fiction. Kornbluh cites *Bleak House* (rather than, say, *Middlemarch*) as "familiarly the paradigmatic instance, the most extreme and most wholly adequate exemplar, of Victorian literary realism" (80), a verdict that might surprise some readers: this is a novel, after all, that asks us to imagine a megalosaurus waddling up Holborn Hill, disposes of one character by spontaneous combustion, and includes others that "have nothing in common with

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each other, except the fact that they have nothing in common with mankind at large" (as Henry James complained of another Dickens novel).[12]

Strikingly, all of Kornbluh's case studies—*Wuthering Heights* (1846), *Alice in Wonderland* (1865), and *Jude the Obscure* (1895) as well as *Bleak House*—have been outliers in the modern canon of "classical realism." This observation need not be a complaint, since the critical distance from which Kornbluh marshals her analysis enables its formidable generalizing power. Here (as with Freedgood) the question arises as to the specificity of realism, and of the Victorian novel, in an argument that comes categorically to bear on fiction as such. The speculative projection of alternate "social spaces of lived reality," which the novel shares with Marxist dialectical critique, subsumes Freedgood's antinomy between fictionality and reference; while the novel, in turn, "offers Marxism the special dialectic internal to synchronic logic, the thought of totalization *and* the thought of the structures in a parallel universe with that which is total now" (62). Jameson (a key interlocutor in *The Order of Forms*) had identified the utopian thought of alternate social worlds with romance rather than with realism, in *The Political Unconscious* (and cited *Wuthering Heights* as a novelistic case).[13] What is specific here to realism, subsuming its referential tropism, appears to be the (Lukácsian and Jamesonian) principle of "the thought of totalization," which modern conditions (i.e., capitalism) determine as purely formal and abstract, "spatial without being mimetic" (50). Following Lukács and Jameson but revising the specificity of their claims, Kornbluh insists on realism's historical finitude: 1848 (*Wuthering Heights*) marks "an alternative threshold [to Lukács's], not the end of realism but the beginning of realism's real phase" (62), while 1895 marks its decline (*Jude the Obscure*, rehearsing its familiar role in the drama of Hardy's career).

It is within this half-century, Kornbluh contends, that "realism's own formalism, its propensity to abstract social relations into their essential configurations, to fathom form as essential social infrastructure," comes into full and clear articulation (16)—in the novel, and at the same time in political theory (Marx's early writings) and in the revolutions of Victorian mathematics. Kornbluh's boldly deductive account of realist form as an operation of abstraction, pitched against empiricist accounts of it (going back to Ian Watt's *Rise of the Novel*) as the registration of phenomenal particularity, relies upon an explicit claim for formal abstraction as a human cognitive a priori. Kornbluh draws on Marx, revising Aristotle: "Man is *zoon politikon* in the most literal sense: he is not only a social animal, but an animal that can be individualized only within

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society" (29). Form, the abstract principle of social relationality that precedes any particular historical formation, is the premise of human species being. It is necessary, a universal condition, in that life "essentially depends upon composed relations, institutions, states" (4), even as specific forms are undetermined, contingent, and (hence) always available to be reformed and reinvented. This argument assumes—as a regulative rather than a constitutive principle, no doubt—the human exceptionalism built into the developmental conception of biological form since its late-Enlightenment articulation, which holds our species to be unique in having no given particular form (i.e., instinct): setting us free, within the unsurmountable horizon of social relationality, to devise our own forms of life in relation to the material conditions of our existence.

The ungrounded condition of human sociality, such that no particular social form is preprogrammed, teleological, means (in this account) that human sociality is constitutively, intrinsically antagonistic. An unillusioned—realist—political praxis entails the management of that essential antagonism, harnessing it for more equitable distributions of power and resources, as opposed to a more or less quixotic attempt to overcome it. In holding fast to that hard insight, *Wuthering Heights* earns its station at "the beginning of realism's real phase." Brontë's novel offers a salutary corrective to the contemporaneous *Communist Manifesto* (1848), which projects a false utopian horizon ("romanticizing a communist end") at which the "universal antagonism," in its manifestation as class struggle, withers away (59): class being the local fetish that blocks Marx and Engels's thought. "*Wuthering Heights* posits the indelible thesis that social antagonism is unending, larger than capitalism and the regime of private property, but also that social formations, in all their stylized structure, remain necessary, malleable, constructible" (63). For the thought, Kornbluh turns to the contemporaneous emergence of mathematical set theory and its affordance of a "radical synchronic thinking, instantaneous representation of the extent of what exists and the extent of what could be" (63). For Brontë, then, "to tell this story, narrative time itself must be not one but two: juxtaposed, and spatially defined," in a novel that, confining its action almost entirely to the internal architecture of the two houses (Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange), realizes "the transcendental antagonism, the nongivenness of social space" (69).

This is a provocative, indeed brilliant reading of *Wuthering Heights*. Kornbluh's combination of (sometimes strenuous) abstract reasoning with a fine-grained imaginative attunement to textual pattern and detail makes for one of the impressive strengths of *The Order of Forms*.

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If Freedgood's *Worlds Enough* refreshes Victorian novels by zigzagging across and out of them, Kornbluh does so by delving into their internal literary workings. There is an infectious pleasure in these encounters—a readiness to be surprised, and then to surprise us by folding the apparent oddity into the ongoing argument—that is about as far from the dour routine of an applied theoretical program as anyone could wish. Kornbluh's account of *Alice in Wonderland* is comparably exhilarating, indeed it may be the highlight of the book, a lucid summation of the general argument. (It helps that the writing relaxes here into a more colloquial manner.) As with Freedgood's Victorian ghost stories, the seemingly anomalous case illuminates the general condition: "far from realism's opposite, *Wonderland* distills realism to its essence. . . . It both concentrates and intensifies realism's projective, world-making faculty" (110). Charles Dodgson's professional credentials as Oxford mathematics lecturer and author of a treatise on symbolic logic lend more than coincidental heft to the analogical link with Victorian mathematical formalism, and its conversion of the discipline "from a description of the world to a projection of possible worlds" (105).

The new mathematics provides the purest version of the operation Kornbluh takes to be foundational to formalism's utopian drive: its reduction of the sign (communicating reference) to the symbol (figuring in an internal logical chain) and thence, ultimately, to a materialist iteration of the letter. This last declension is extrapolated through an ingenious reading of geometrical figures and inscriptions in *Jude the Obscure*. (The novel's notorious pessimism makes its utopian drive harder to discern, at least for me. Claire Jarvis gives a quite different, and compelling, account of the novel's utopianism—in the attempt by Jude and Sue to realize a nonprocreative heterosexual partnership—in her recent *Exquisite Masochism*.)[14] Early on, Kornbluh cites Marx and Engels's *The German Ideology* (1846) to argue for a radical identification of materialism with "a writing that addresses itself to, endeavors to perform, the writing in nature—not the physical facticity of life, but the 'definite form of expressing life,' . . . an ontology of structuration as the very matter of our political nature" (26). "Writing" here means the material iteration of that principle of formal organization which is the condition of human life as a social and historical phenomenon. As such it exceeds any local, referential claim upon it as a description of what happens to be (or must be). In rehearsing "the symbolic logic of literary realism" (118), *Alice in Wonderland* "reduces the letter to bare form, emphasizing its constituting power, actuating the maxim of formalist mathematics—

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everything that can be consistently inscribed must be possible—and in doing so it reveals the formal aegis of realism, the production of possible worlds" (121). Everything that can be consistently inscribed (i.e., written without internal contradiction) "must be possible": transferred from mathematics to literary realism, with its modeling of the social forms through which we live our lives, this is an outrageously optimistic claim. Perhaps we need such optimism now.

Freedgood's management of her argument's utopian turn is more ambivalent. The generation of ontologically incommensurate multiple worlds—"infinite folds of space and time" (xv)—turns out to be "a key technology" for the production of liberal subjectivity, in Victorian high-imperial mode. "The novel—an imperial genre at the highest level of formal abstraction, and at the most basic level of content—teaches us the practices of space and time that allow us to imagine and enact expansion and colonization—of territory, of the future, of other minds" (99), since, it seems, "the liberal subject needs worlds—a world of aesthetic autonomy, for example, and a world of plantation slavery—in which to dwell" (103). Realism facilitates that "need" (or luxury) by providing those multiple worlds "in a way we have come to experience as seamless, as realistic" (103). Returning its seams to raw and scabrous prominence, *Worlds Enough* dispels the realist illusion of smoothness—of naturalness—that licensed the world-occupying fantasy. This, the negative thrust of Freedgood's critical project, accords so far with a familiar critical praxis, a defamiliarization of ideological forms that seeks to expose the arbitrariness and violence of their construction.

Freedgood's lessons in metalepsis are too witty and mischievous to inculcate anything so dull as a renunciation of the pleasures of fiction. We share the zest with which she flits from footnotes on the Canadian partridge, Philippine hornbill, and Indian mynah (in novels by Catherine Parr Traill, José Rizal, and Rudyard Kipling) across the imperial ecologies of those birds'—generally disastrous—intersections with human history, taking us from stuffed fowl in the British Museum of Natural History to a website selling jewelry made from the feathers of mynahs in New Zealand, where the birds have been declared an invasive pest. Freedgood's last chapter discloses her project's positive critical thrust: to "decoloniz[e] the novel," the object of novel studies, of the "aesthetic racism" that has awarded the accolade of realism to (a selection of) novels produced within the European core while withholding it from those from outside it, on the grounds of an aesthetic failure symptomatic of cultural underdevelopment (134–35, 139). With their

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characterization of the literature of the so-called peripheries as imperfectly processed raw material, Freedgood argues, such judgments recapitulate a toxic imperial logic of resource extraction and proletarian outsourcing.

Dispelling the aura of realism from Victorian novels levels them with the democratic field of the novel as a multifarious global form: an ideological downsizing, to just another novel, that works less to diminish *Mary Barton* or *David Copperfield* (as though liberal guilt would deter us from reading them—instead, Freedgood helps us to be better readers of them) than to direct our professionally refined attention to those other novels from beyond the metropolitan core. To keep belittling or neglecting them is to perpetuate an ideology of global development that "controls not only our curricula but our residual ideas about civilizations and cultures—ideas that should be left behind while we allow 'peripheral' literatures and the neglected wisdom of their critics to come more fully into view when we think about what novels do" (145). Freedgood advocates a redistribution of cultural capital that flattens Western culture's ontological privilege by extending it to all traditions and all readers: not to enrich everyone everywhere with the imaginary dividends of liberal subjecthood (neoliberalism's false promise) but to induce a shared discomfort—an authentic attitude to being in the world. Real realism.

Notes

1. Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism*, 5. On this and other attempts to define the category, see Goodlad, "Introduction," 184–91.
2. Jaffe, *The Victorian Novel Dreams of the Real*, 5.
3. Goodlad, *The Victorian Geopolitical Aesthetic*, 36.
4. See, for the former, Goodlad, *The Victorian Geopolitical Aesthetic*, 28–37; for the latter, Steinlight, *Populating the Novel*.
5. See, e.g. (a very selective list), Ermarth, *Realism and Consensus in the English Novel*; Moretti, *The Way of the World*; Cottom, *Social Figures*; Miller, *The Novel and the Police*.
6. Jaffe, *Victorian Novel*, 5.
7. Lavery, "Trans Realism," 721, 723.
8. Freedgood, *The Ideas in Things*.
9. See Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, 19; Rigney, *Imperfect Histories*, 13–58.
10. Anderson, *Bleak Liberalism*, 46–77.

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11. Goodlad, *Victorian Geopolitical Aesthetic*, 154–55; Jaffe, *Victorian Novel*, 116–38; Steinlight, *Populating the Novel*, 150–56.
12. James, review of *Our Mutual Friend*, 471.
13. Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 126–29.
14. Jarvis, *Exquisite Masochism*, 25–55.

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