How Practical is Critique? From Matters of Concern to Matters of Commitment

Recent critical discourse on “critique” tends to betray a certain discomfort with critique’s Enlightenment origins and its corresponding alignment with notions of autonomous subjectivity and universality. Especially since Bruno Latour’s broadside against critical “anti-fetishism,” supporters have been at pains to distance critique from the image of a self-satisfied vanguard chiding the unenlightened.

This paper pursues a defense of critique that reclaims its Enlightenment lineage in order to assemble, in Mark Hulliung’s words, an “autocritique of Enlightenment.”¹ Reading Immanuel Kant and Karl Marx via Kojin Karatani and Slavoj Žižek, I trace a line of thought in which critique foregrounds the intersection between theory and practice. It is at that intersection that the fetish appears. In contrast to Latour and some of critique’s defenders, I consider the fetish, not a blind spot that immobilizes, but a point of contact representing a practical commitment. A fetish augments the world of experience, quilting it into an interpretable whole, bringing things into a certain relation while excluding other relations.

In an influential revision of both Marxist and psychoanalytic notions of fetishism, Žižek argues that contemporary subjects reinforce ideology not through naïve credulity but in the very knowing posture of “fetishistic disavowal,” as expressed in Jacques Lacan’s formula, *je sais bien, mais quand même* (“I know very well, but nevertheless…”). Yet even Kant performs a “fetishistic disavowal” of sorts: *I know very well* that there is no empirical ground for metaphysical commitments, *but nevertheless* I will make them because it is the only way to live autonomously and foster others’ autonomy. In the symbolic order of capitalism, such “faith without belief” loses its intentional character, crystallizing in commodity fetishism as “the religion of everyday life” (*Religion des Alltagslebens*).² Yet faith without belief also
informs the Romantic view of literature as the site for a dialectic of truth and illusion, and Theodor W. Adorno’s thesis that a “fetish character” is intrinsic to artworks no less than commodities. This fetish character makes the literary text, like ideology, a fitting occasion for critique. Herein lies the parallel between literary reading and the critique of ideology, and the reason why critique need not subordinate one to the other in order to be properly critical.

In one of the most wide-ranging and sophisticated defenses of critique to date, Carolyn Lesjak insightfully characterizes the type of critique now widely under attack as concerned with “ideology” in its “symptomal mode.” This type of critique considers ideology an obfuscating force that represses the truth of our situation until it returns in the form of “symptoms.” She proposes that critique shift its focus to the “fetishistic mode” of ideology that Žižek explicates throughout his oeuvre. In this mode, ideology no longer operates (if, as I shall suggest, it ever did) as an obstacle to knowledge, but rather as a supplement to experience, helping the subject orient herself in social practice.

Examining what is at stake philosophically in the transition from symptom to fetish, my argument extends and challenges that of Lesjak’s article, “Reading Dialectically,” in two complimentary ways. First, by anchoring anti-fetishist critique in a reading of Kant, Marx, and Adorno, I supply what I consider the missing Enlightenment genealogy to Lesjak’s intended critical program. Second, I pinpoint ways in which this genealogy’s absence hinders the execution of her design. Though she announces the transition from “symptomatic” to “fetishistic” accounts of ideology, Lesjak leaves the key concept of “fetish” insufficiently theorized, apparently reluctant to sanction Enlightenment notions of self-knowledge, autonomy, and universality that give accusations of fetishism their polemical force.

Accusing critique’s opponents of “fetishizing” texts by detaching them from their historical contexts, Lesjak equates fetishism with the obfuscation of essential truths. Anti-fetishist critique thus becomes an exercise in recovering what has been “occluded,” like the
“symptomatic reading” whose insufficiency Lesjak concedes. My paper proposes a different understanding of fetishism, grounded in a different reading of the critical tradition leading from Kant to Žižek. In my view, a fetish does not so much obstruct as mediate and connect, giving the subject a place in a world that now makes sense. This account breaks with the logic of the symptomatic, meeting Latour’s challenge to anti-fetishism head-on. It also reorients critique toward the practical need to remediate subjects’ relation to society, forming new connections to replace those that run through the fetish.

While such work cannot be complete without concrete political action, critique’s efforts to work through our ideological fetishism opens a door to practice by addressing the ways in which the fetish is no mere fact or illusion but rather a figure that stands for a social commitment. In what follows, after explaining what I mean by “commitment,” I will review arguments by Latour, Eve Sedgwick and Žižek to show how the fetish brings us to practical matters. Then, in critical dialogue with Lesjak, I will outline the genealogy of fetishism and its critique from Kant through Marx to Adorno, and discuss literature’s kinship to ideology, the basis for a new—but also very old—model of critical reading. Like ideology, literary works augment lived experience with figures that enable us to navigate that experience, but in full awareness of these figures’ fictionality. Literature invites us to be its willing dupes. This is its fetish character, but also the key to the capacity for reflection that literature offers. By engaging readers in the kind of work they are already doing as subjects of ideology, but with the heightened awareness available to the mind engaged pleasurably in a voluntary pursuit, literature can train readers in the art of working through their ideological commitments.

Concerned or Committed?
To gloss my use of “commitment” and “practice,” I now turn to Raymond Geuss’s recent defense of pragmatism. Geuss aims to free his readers from the perceived imperative to adopt a coherent “worldview.” As he defines it, a worldview does not just explain things or put them in order but also provides an image of the self that requires her to live in a certain way. These two functions are distinct but not separable, any more than one can separate the doctrine of the Incarnation from a Christian’s commitment to taking communion. The trouble Geuss sees in a worldview is not only that it oversimplifies a complex reality, but also that it constrains the subject’s spontaneity. A worldview gives us obligations that we are free to refuse, but only at the cost of no longer being quite who we thought we were. Moreover, if we do refuse them, we thereby concede that the world is not what we thought or said that it was. By implication, our cognitive grasp of both the world and ourselves is bound up with our actions. Such obligations exemplify what I call commitments. They motivate practice in the simplest sense, making people do things. Because a commitment ceases to count as such if it does not motivate actions, actions are needed to sustain commitments. Likewise, action, or at least pointed inaction, is needed to dismantle or replace them.

Though the specific features of a worldview organized around an ideological fetish and those of the commitments that sustain it will emerge later on in this essay, I now wish to distinguish “matters of commitment” in general from Latour’s “matters of concern,” which do not imply a unified worldview coalescing around a central element. Latour’s criticism of critique foregrounds “anti-fetishism” in part because he opposes the fetish’s privileged position in critical analyses. To focus on the fetish is to focus on subjectivity, in line with the subject-object duality that the post-Heideggerian Latour rejects. To Latour, facts, things, and forces are always already embedded in experiential networks including the people who study or use them, obviating the need for reflection on subject-object relations. Accordingly, Latour’s “actor-network theory” constructs assemblages of agency that do not distinguish
hierarchically among ideas, objects both natural and manufactured, living beings both human and not, institutions, and all manner of other things. When “matters of concern” can be assembled in myriad configurations, why single out one element as responsible for everything else? To answer this question, we must turn to the battle of critique—the *Kritikerstreit* itself!

The Case against Critique

Critique concerns ideology; so much is clear from the two essays that launched the contemporary debate about critique, Eve Sedgwick’s “Paranoid and Reparative Reading” and Latour’s “Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?” The force with which these papers hit the world of critique derived in part from their authors’ status as prominent practitioners of critique, and critique’s common heritage marks on both texts. In particular, Sedgwick and Latour here share with their critical opponents the premise that scholarly method is inherently political. They both detail the near-ubiquity of self-consciously suspicious thought in the political arena, from September 11 conspiracy theories to the claim that anthropogenic climate change is a hoax, noting that public spectacles of domination make a mockery of intellectuals’ claims to expose a matrix of control supposedly operating out of sight.

In the turn away from the social-democratic capitalism that once spawned Adornian and Foucauldian critiques of the liberal subject and ran aground in the 1970’s, giving rise to the new Right, Sedgwick finds a change in the workings of ideology that renders much ideological detective work obsolete. Though Sedgwick hardly disowns her own contributions to critique, the increasingly blatant character of domination under neoliberalism has led her to question the sufficiency of critical projects framed by a “hermeneutic of suspicion.” Unless tempered by “reparative” readings that bolster readers affectively against the alienations that critique reveals, the latter’s “paranoid” style risks strengthening a background suspiciousness
in no way guaranteed to benefit progressives. Sedgwick’s worries look prescient in the light of subsequent cultural development. Academics who strive to awaken students’ suspicion of familiar concepts like human nature or sexual difference now see their own suspicious impulse staring uncannily back at them in the eyes of climate change denialists and purveyors of conspiracy theories about “the deep state,” “the new world order,” and Covid-19.

Seeing the beginnings of this illiberal alignment, Latour concludes that system-critical intellectuals should relinquish the traits that tie them to the enemy. Specifically, we should stop prioritizing the search for empirical reality’s enabling conditions. Rather than interrogate “matters of fact,” asking what makes any given fact a fact, we should focus on tracing their manifold interconnections, cultivating “matters of concern.” This approach Latour sees as a way of “getting closer to the facts,” not “running away” from them in search of their cognitive foundations. Latour proposes that we close the era of critique once opened by Immanuel Kant, who first “directed our attention away from facts to what makes them possible.”

On this account, critique’s practitioners do not add to our knowledge, but rather sit in judgment over our claim to know it. This objection presumes that critique’s concerns are primarily cognitive. Yet arguably the most influential critique of ideology today focuses on practice more than cognition.

Since the late 1980’s, Žižek has developed an account of ideology responsive to our post-Fordist and post-socialist world: what Lesjak calls the “fetishistic mode” of “ideology.” Žižek argues that what people today ignore is not the character of their social system but their own libidinal investment in upholding it. The only awareness lacking in today’s cynics and conspiracy theorists is self-awareness. As an early Žižek title has it, They Know Not What They Do. The subject of ideology thinks that she and she alone is not taken in by the illusions peddled by others. This stance, which so closely resembles the stance of critique as Latour and Sedgwick present it, Žižek sees as that of ideology.
At the heart of ideology today is not a blind spot but a disavowal: “I know very well, but nevertheless.” It has become common to mock people who say, “I am not racist, but…” Žižek calls such a statement “fetishistic disavowal.” The speaker disavows her attachment to her fetish, i.e. to that thing that we all know is powerless, yet exerts power on us nevertheless. Disavowing racism as a source of enjoyment, she is able to enjoy it because of that disavowal.

In a recent lecture, Žižek draws a provocative parallel between Nazi anti-Semitism and the game *Pokemon Go*. What distinguishes this game is the way it integrates the external world: the player’s cell phone acts as a camera, capturing the landscape behind it and peopling it with little monsters for the player to chase. Rather than offer players a fantasy world more gratifying than the real one, *Pokemon Go* places players in the same world they otherwise inhabit, with the difference that now they have a small colorful creature to pursue. Žižek then paraphrases the appeal of Nazism, saying that while Germans around 1930 found reality “boring and chaotic,” Hitler told them to “look for the Jew.”

It is at first light distasteful to compare a cell-phone game to a politically orchestrated mass hysteria culminating in genocide. Yet arguably what makes the analogy offensive is the shock of recognition we experience when told that our own meaning-making behavior is on a spectrum with Hitler’s. If so, the shock registers something we did not know about ourselves, but this *something* is less a matter of knowledge than of practice. We know not what we do.

Ideology is not a misrepresentation of the real. It is reality itself, plus an added element that makes it cohere in a satisfying way. Žižek’s *Pokemon* analogy develops an account of ideology begun in his early work. In *For They Know Not What They Do* (1991), Žižek applies Lacan’s notion of the “quilting point” (*point de capiton*) to anti-Semitism. Lacan claims that a subject’s lived understanding of her being in the world coheres only when “woven” around some element whose only function in the whole is to hold it together. This element may be nonsensical, but it enables everything else to gain sense and solidity.
When a character in Bob Fosse’s film “Cabaret” asks an anti-Semite to explain what is wrong with Jews, the anti-Semite slides into contradictions: the Jew is a banker and a communist, impotent and all-powerful, ascetic and hypersexual, etc.\textsuperscript{18} As the logic of “both-and” supplants the law of non-contradiction, the ideology becomes immune to refutation. Žižek argues that nothing that any Jewish person does can dislodge the anti-Semite’s animus, since whatever she does will either recall stereotypes of Jewish behavior or, if it seems atypical, confirm the stereotype of Jewish dissimulation and cunning.\textsuperscript{19}

Jewishness may mean nothing in particular and the “Jew” could be anyone, but the figure is vital to the anti-Semite because only the alleged Jewish conspiracy makes the disparate components of lived experience congeal into a meaningful whole. Yet the fetish of the Jew can function heuristically only when supported by practice. To maintain the worldview quilted around “the Jew,” anti-Semites must continually pin this figure to flesh-and-blood people: hence the violence of anti-Semitism.

Like \textit{Pokemon Go}, ideology is not a “virtual reality,” but an “augmented” one.\textsuperscript{20} What augments reality is the fetish. The fetish-figure of “the Jew” has no determinate meaning, but ensures the consistency of the world of meanings. Yet it can do so only if it has or seems to have some basis in experience. Only by changing that experience can anti-fetishists disrupt the ideology’s force. Though that challenge is immense, attending to it is more productive than trying to convince someone through logic to part with something whose appeal was never a matter of logic, being instead a source of meaning, justification, and last but not least, enjoyment.\textsuperscript{21}

A fetish is a problem of practice as well as theory, and no concept of fetishism can have purchase unless it contains both dimensions, cognitive and practical. Latour zooms in on the exposure of fetishes as the crucial operation of critique, but overlooks the fetish’s position at the point of intersection between thought and practice. Accordingly, he sees the double
movement of critique as a rapid-fire succession of knowledge claims. First, the critic plays the constructivist card, telling his unsuspecting prey that while the latter thinks her fetish is alive and active, it is really just her own construction. Once the alleged fetishist recovers from this “blow” and asserts her agency over the thing now decried as a fetish, the critic lands “the second blow,” revealing the force behind the fetish as an objective reality that one cannot diffuse simply by claiming it as one’s own.22

Critique appears duplicitous, but not because it contradicts itself. Latour reconstructs the dialectical argument that fetishism inheres in individual subjectivity, which in turn has been shaped by “powerful causalities.”23 Yet while these claims are not inconsistent, to Latour they suggest an epistemological dilemma in which one cannot say where the fetish comes from or how one might discard it. Latour dramatizes the both/and of dialectic as a boxing maneuver in which the critic hits her prey from both sides. The alleged fetishist cannot take refuge either in the individual or the social, because each pole now appears tainted by the other. The critic having cornered both sides of the argument, the fetishist can only admit defeat: wherever she turns, there is only critique! Yet only the fetishist is caught in this double trap; the critic seems to be boxing from outside the ring.

Latour’s image of critique as pugilism conforms to his view that critique’s primary concern is cognitive rather than practical. Once the “fetishist” owns up to what the critic claims to know about her, the critic uses the leverage she has gained to floor her opponent by claiming greater knowledge of society in turn. To get trapped in this argument is to get trapped in the thing that it explicates; the critic has defined the fetish such that there is no escape from it. It follows that the critic’s claim to immunity can only be specious.

If a fetish were a mere falsehood, then there would really be no escape, because fetishes do not conceal any underlying truth. Their purpose is to quilt the world of experience into a satisfying whole, not to obfuscate it. Successful anti-fetishism would not “expose” a
fetish so much as work through it and lessen its libidinal hold on us. In this light, what looked like a double trap now becomes an exit. The fetish belongs to both the subject and the society because it is what mediates between them. The critic does not aim to correct the fetishist’s vision so much as re-mediate her relation to society. Framing things around her interlocutor’s commitment to the fetish, she works to recruit her for a collective project of reframing.

Latour’s polemic with “anti-fetishism” is part of his broader campaign against the subject-object paradigm characteristic of self-consciously “modern” thought. Latour’s fictional critic ascribes the fetish to both subject and object, the delusional individual and the objective world of social custom, negating both the individual’s freedom and her culture’s moral authority. The only authority left is critique itself. To persuade us to reject that authority, Latour indicates that, by the critic’s own terms, she cannot prove the fetish more false or illusory than other things; neither the individual’s spontaneous inclinations nor social consensus supports her in this claim. Yet this argument designed to rebut critique’s presumed “drama of exposure”24 does not have the same purchase against critique conceived as a project of social re-mediation. The work of untying the knots that bind us to a worldview and tying new knots in their place does not require the certificate of epistemic mastery that Latour thinks critique obtains by imposture. Neither is its subject-object dichotomy a vain trap for the critically uncredentialled. To posit subjectivity and the objective world as distinct yet interdependent is to consider both subject to change, though never one without the other.

In his haste to convict critique of hubris, Latour does not consider that the critic and the fetishist are potentially the same person. Critique has no legs to stand on if it means that the avowed critic alone is sane while everyone else, including great writers, is captive to ideology—if it upholds, as Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus put it, “the untenable claim that we are always more free than those who produce the texts we study.”25 Much of the contemporary opposition to critique thus perceives in it what Rita Felski calls “a regrettable
arrogance of intellect.” Yet the model I have outlined has very different implications. It considers ideology, not a cluster of beliefs, but a phantasmatic supplement to experience that structures fantasies and actions. Because this supplement is socially rooted, the critic relates to it as others do; she, too, is a subject of ideology who can either work through or disavow her ideological investments. Yet no matter how worked through, the fetish cannot vanish until the social arrangement that makes it functional does so. Critique is incomplete unless it issues in transformative praxis. The ultimate goal is to effect social change that dismantles the fetish.

Repairing Critique

Having outlined the manner of critique appropriate to ideological fetishism, I now turn to Carolyn Lesjak’s attempt to formulate a corresponding program for literary criticism. Though Lesjak underlines “the need…to distinguish between the symptomal mode of ideology…and the fetishistic mode,” I will argue that Lesjak’s own framing unwittingly frustrates this distinction. Defining fetishism such that she must supplement, but not break with, symptomatic reading, she retains the surface/depth dichotomy that keeps the discourse on critique pinned to issues of knowledge, rather than commitment or practice.

After canvassing several schools that reject critique, Lesjak frames her defense primarily in opposition to Best and Marcus’s notion of “surface reading,” which she sees as the license to take texts at their word, in isolation from the contexts on which critique insists (255 ff.). Not content to dismiss or debunk surface reading, Lesjak seeks to account for it within the historical failures of critical reading. Though she writes that “staying on the surface is the most ideological of positions,” that position has something to teach ideology’s critics, who have unduly neglected the power of ideological semblance in their haste to get to the
bottom of things (263). These critics also neglect the pleasure of aesthetic surfaces, ceding
that terrain of struggle to the willfully superficial.

Setting symptomatic reading into dialectical interplay with surface reading, Lesjak
retains their shared premise: that one can best illuminate a text and its contexts by figuring
them in spatial form. Noting objections to this premise, I will propose another path to
Lesjak’s goal of a critique responsive to the problem of praxis. Revisiting critique’s
Enlightenment sources, I will argue that symptomatic reading is a misreading of critique as
presented by Kant and Marx, not the reflection of an earlier stage that now needs correction.

Presuming that ideology once operated in a “symptomatic mode” which called for
“symptomatic reading,” what kind of reading does its “fetishistic mode” require? A critique
that focuses on fetishes would operate differently from one that searches for symptoms. Yet
Lesjak proposes to combine and mediate “surface” and “symptomatic” approaches. Inspired
by Sedgwick’s call to a “reparative reading” capable of healing the wounds inflicted by
critique in its “paranoid” mode, Lesjak sets out to repair suspicious critique by integrating it
with other approaches. Drawing on Fredric Jameson, she assures us that in critique,
“unmasking” is “only half the story, the other half being…the articulation of the positive
Utopian impulses that lie along negative critique” (246). Yet if ideology now operates
fetishistically, not symptomatically, why should “unmasking” be any part of “the story”?}

Taking up Žižek’s term, Lesjak accuses surface readers of “fetishistic disavowal,”
asserting that their choice to “stay on the surface” indicates a denial to “subjectively assume
what [they] know” about the sociohistorical determination of the text and their own readings
(248). Yet fetishistic ideology, as Lesjak pictures it, remains symptomatic. Proposing to
“think the occlusion that structures the surfaces being privileged” by surface reading, she
protests, “surface readings have no real capacity to understand themselves as symptoms, even
though they are…symptoms of once-dominant hermeneutic models of interpretation”
On the surface of these readings, the physician sees “symptoms” of what has been “occluded.” Lesjak claims that surface readers “fetishize the text in their celebration of its surface,” passing over the question of what other dimensions—social, historical, ideological—enable that shiny surface to appear as such in the first place (249). One last jab mobilizes Latour: “Surface reading, in its desire for a kind of neutral knowingness, fantasizes that surfaces can be ‘matters of fact’ rather than ‘matters of concern’” (251).

For Lesjak, the fetish is a “symptom” not recognized as such—an isolated fact whose aura “occludes” the recognition of larger contexts. Thus surface readers become “fetishists” by falling short of Latour’s recommendation to assemble facts into “matters of concern.” Lesjak sees “surface readers” clinging to the “fact” of the text, as a “fetishist” clings to her fetish, avoiding the concerns that arise from the text’s relation to other things.

The present paper defines fetishism very differently. The fetish already sits in the center of the “matter of concern” we call ideology. Its job is not to “occlude” but to bring things into relation, enabling the subject to make sense of her world. On these terms, one cannot equate critique with “symptomatic reading,” which “surface reading” sets out to subvert. Once we cease to define the fetish as something that prevents subjects from looking beyond the surface to a deeper or more “three-dimensional” reality (251), the dialectic of surface and depth that frames Lesjak’s argument needs not detain critique.

Spatial figuration is not a particularly helpful guide to critical reading because it is not clear what “space” we are really talking about when discussing a text. Is a literary work, for example, “spatial” in a sense helpfully analogous to the geographies of globalization? If a text has a “depth,” is it in the text itself, or some physical space to which the text refers? Rejecting the notion that texts are “things with surfaces and depths,” Toril Moi takes Lesjak, Best, and Marcus to task for figuring the text spatially. Lesjak may insist that those interested in sociohistorical depths must come to terms with the appeal of aesthetic surfaces, but neither
party can demonstrate that the text brings together historical and aesthetic features as its surface and depth. Here is a postcritical insight that critique could absorb dialectically. The notion that literature confronts its interpreters with a choice between a surface and a depth is uncritical, or at best a rationale for the “symptomatic reading” that Lesjak means to surpass.

Without breaking out of critique’s spatial coordinates, Lesjak does work to enhance them, supplementing the surface/depth dichotomy with an attention to relations of proximity. Lesjak reasons that connections between the deep structures of social life and the surface phenomena of everyday experience come to light in things we see right next door. Avoiding the imperiousness that critique’s critics perceive in its claim to unmask depths, the “lateral” approach makes visible what was with us all along, but which we never bothered to see (252 ff.).

Taking Jameson’s cue to paraphrase “Žižek’s famous title” as “they know what they are doing (but they do it anyway),” Lesjak adds a third term to mediate between theory and practice. This third term is “seeing.” To close the gap between “knowing” and “doing,” we need to “see what we know” (251-2). The implicit premise is that we would then be driven to act on it. This premise may seem self-evident; one common move in contemporary political rhetoric is to claim that an oppressed group has become “invisible.” Yet visibility hardly guarantees solidarity. Immigrants, refugees and racialized groups are visible enough to racists, who see them as potential criminals and terrorists.

Though Lesjak notes that “the fetish…does its work in plain sight, but remains ideological” (251), her diagnosis of ideology as a failure to “see what we know” still suits the “symptomatic” model of repressed awareness better than the logic of fetishistic disavowal. The subject cleaves to the fetish because it brings together what would otherwise be disparate, in a way that is deeply pleasing. If putting the truth right in front of her eyes were enough to wrest the fetish from the subject, she would be more likely to see chaos than an enabling
“matter of concern.” If we know what we are doing, but still do it, that is not likely due to our not seeing it. The problem is, what do we want?

Critique concerns subjectivity, and ideally, literary critique would examine subject-formation in relation to the literary text. Lesjak locates subjectivity within a complex system of spatial relations in which “space” is sometimes metaphorical and sometimes literal. The difficulties inherent to this schema are apparent in the most immediately political example to which she applies it. At issue is the emergence of a broad informal sector of the un- or underemployed who do not fit the Fordist picture of a working class securely engaged in mass production. Like Jameson and Žižek before her, Lesjak urges the Left to address the political subjectivity of these populations, and not dismiss them as potential “bribed tools of reactionary intrigue,” as Marx describes what he calls the Lumpenproletariat. The idea is that an emphasis on those excluded from value production can bring to light a potential new revolutionary subject, relieving Marxists of their obsolete focus on the industrial proletariat.

Singling out those whose labor is no longer in demand, Lesjak shoehorns this concern into her model of lateral proximity by writing that the “formerly employed” are “closest to the lumpenproletariat” (italics added) (262). Also, the fact that they are everywhere now attests to the importance of a “spatial dialectic” (264). Mixing literal and figurative registers, the idea’s claim to visualize the importance of “proximity” is tenuous, though it is this very claim that ostensibly aligns it with such diverse phenomena as Jameson’s reading of Fernand Braudel’s Mediterranean history, Sogyal Rinpoche’s meditations on the “near-miss pedagogy” of Buddhism, and Eve Sedgwick’s aesthetics and hermeneutics of touch (256-62).

Moreover, the shift of political emphasis that Lesjak and her sources propose rests on an empirically questionable claim about the global economy and working class. According to Marxian economist Michael Roberts, the global unemployment rate just before the Covid-19 outbreak was extraordinarily low, and the number of people employed in industrial
production worldwide had risen dramatically since 1991. On the basis of UN and ILO statistics, Joseph Choonara writes that between 2000 and 2019, the world wage-laborer population grew by 50%. Globally, it is far from certain that what Marx called “relative surplus populations” have grown at the expense of the traditional proletariat to the point that the former have overtaken the latter as a plausible revolutionary subject.

Because Lesjak introduces this idea without explicit reflection on how it relates to literary texts, we are left to wonder whether the crucial link is thematic, formal, or both. The problem with correcting critique by adjusting its spatial coordinates is that we remain within the thematic of seeing better, of broadening our horizons—which is to say, of cognition. So long as we do this, we remain prone to imagining that more knowledge is all we need.

Lesjak works to expand critique’s range, incorporating a variety of resources from Jameson and Žižek to Sedgwick and the texts that they read, in order to supplement her analysis of the “global, virtual, derivative-driven flows of capital” with a rich picture of what it is like to live in the landscapes they shape (252; 264). However expansive, this project of revamping critique by furnishing it with new contents misses a simpler point essential to the defense of critique against rival approaches to literature. Critique’s distinction cannot be that it subscribes to one or another thesis on what drives capital accumulation today, and combines this analysis of objective conditions with the will to explore how we experience them. Critique’s difference lies, not in the combination of objectivity and subjectivity, but in its attention to how the two are mediated. Critique focuses on commitment. It can do so when addressing texts that do not say much about capitalism, “derivative-driven” or otherwise.

If we define critical reading as a practice of reflecting on our ideological subjectivity through the medium of a text, we free critique from the obligation to reveal content that our political agenda has determined in advance. Critical reading would then be responsible neither for yielding recognizably political content, nor for assuming any particular spatial form.
Critique would be a simpler matter than Lesjak’s spatial figurations and diverse constellation of models suggest, and it would respond well to her demand for interpretive flexibility. But would reading, understood in this way, still be critical?

I think that it would, because this simpler definition of “critique” is one we can learn from the thinkers who gave us the term. Lesjak has reservations about critique’s Kantian origins. In a passage that she takes to summarize post-critique’s challenge to the critical paradigm, Emily Apter and Elaine Freedgood praise Michael Warner for revealing “the ways in which critical reading silently endorses a Kantian program of individual autonomy, pure reason…and universal freedom” (245). Lesjak’s subsequent discussion works to free critique from the burden of these presumably outmoded ideas. Yet matters cannot be so simple. Neither “critique” nor “dialectic” would be thinkable, historically or conceptually, without the Enlightenment and its notions of a subject working its way through the world toward greater self-knowledge and freedom.

Passages like Apter and Freedgood’s show how centrally the hostility to critique features a rejection of its Enlightenment presuppositions, suggesting that critics need to defend these in some form. That Lesjak does not do so in her article may be a sign of the times, and it is hard to blame her given how confused and polarizing much of our public discourse on the Enlightenment is. One of the opponents of critique Lesjak acknowledges early on is psychologist Stephen Pinker. What she finds noteworthy is Pinker’s opposition to three figures of thought he deems endemic to humanities scholarship, “the ‘blank slate’ (Locke), the ‘Noble Savage’ (Rousseau), and the ‘Ghost in the Machine’ (Descartes)” (234-5). Though these three thought-figures are hardly equivalent, they all concretize in different ways the core Enlightenment and Romantic notion of a malleable subject capable of reflecting on, reforming, and liberating herself. Pinker wants humanists to turn away from this subject toward a biologically determined “human nature” that one cannot reflect on subjectively so
much as verify through empirical data. Pinker may title a recent book *Enlightenment Now!*, but with friends like this one, who needs enemies?

For critique to come to terms with its Enlightenment origins, it must distinguish its own version of that tradition from that of naturalists like Pinker. It is not only a question of defending critical reason against accounts of nature that naturalize domination. In an irony worthy of Adorno and Max Horkheimer, ceding the Enlightenment to Pinker & co. negatively impacts critique’s ability to criticize those aspects of the Enlightenment legacy that today’s critics rightly contest. When critique does not work through, but disavows, its Enlightenment commitments, it risks reassuming the most unreflective version of Enlightenment. The danger is acute when critique identifies “fetishism” as its opponent. This concept requires us to square with what we have learned from the tradition of self-critical reason running through Kant and Marx, or find ourselves denouncing “idols,” like Francis Bacon. This fine distinction is what is at stake in the project of moving critique beyond its “symptomal mode.”

Kant in Theory and Practice

At first glance, Kant looks like the prototype of the “symptomatic” thinker. Maintaining that knowledge and indeed experience are possible only on the basis of a pre-reflective constructive activity on the part of the subject, Kant famously distinguishes the phenomena we experience from “things in themselves,” which lie outside of our cognition. Yet the “thing in itself” is not a concealed essence behind phenomena, but rather marks our awareness of our limitations, the fact that things only ever appear to us within a certain horizon. The subject constructs the world through the categories of the understanding but with an awareness of something else that eludes this construction.
According to Kojin Karatani, this something else is the reality of other subjects. Though plural subjects first explicitly appear in Kant’s discussion of the judgment of taste in the Third Critique, Karatani argues that the standpoint of the other motivates Kantian critique from its beginning. In this reading, the “thing in itself” represents the “position of another’s reason” (die Stelle einer fremden und äußeren Vernunft) from which phenomena appear differently. Our awareness of this other standpoint is what tells us that the phenomena we see from own standpoint do not = things in themselves.

It is through this difference—what the early Kant calls the “strong parallaxes” (starke Parallaxen) between perspectives—that one becomes aware of the need for reason to mark out its own limitations. Both the third-person purview of the sciences and the first-person pursuit of the moral life require the implied second-person. Who is this unforeseen other? She is the later researcher who may refute our hypothesis, and also the stranger whom we are to treat as an end in herself. Finally, aesthetic judgment implies a demand put to other subjects, thus acknowledging our interdependence.

It is in this last domain that Karatani counter-intuitively locates the source for Kant’s critical turn. Citing lectures that Kant gave in the years preceding the First Critique, Karatani traces Kant’s use of the word Kritik to his reading of the Scottish Enlightenment writer Henry Home’s Element of Criticism. Drawing on the neo-Kantian Hans Vaihinger, Karatani quotes a comment Kant made on Home’s book: “Home has more correctly called aesthetics criticism, because it does not, like logic, furnish a priori rules.” Later on, the Third Critique states that there is “no rule in accordance with which someone could be compelled (genötigt) to acknowledge something as beautiful.” Nevertheless, every judgment of taste implies a demand that others agree. To claim that an artwork is beautiful implies that others should find it so, otherwise one is not really making a claim about the artwork at all. Yet even Kant’s wording in this sentence of the Critique indicates that such agreement is unlikely.
If we accept Vaihinger’s thesis that Kant derives his word *Kritik* from his reading of Home, then philosophical critique emerged out of informal art criticism, not the other way around. Kant’s critical practice is the very opposite of the practice of “critique” to which Latour thinks Kantianism gave rise: one of unmasking others’ errors from the secure standpoint of a science whose premises cannot be subject to doubt. Kant’s attempt to put philosophy on “the secure path of a science” (*den sicheren Gang einer Wissenschaft*) begins with the scrutiny of his own position and extends to a reflection on the conditions necessary for constructing a virtual universal community including both ourselves and others whose standpoints we cannot anticipate—and these conditions are practical.

Both versions of the “categorical imperative” concern our relation to other subjects. One version demands that I frame my activity as the expression of a principle applicable to all others. Kant’s second formulation makes the centrality of the others explicit: we are to treat others not merely as means to our own ends but also as ends in themselves. Whatever this mandate implies politically, one needs the others in order to be moral—or autonomous, which for Kant comes to the same thing.

Only by acknowledging the unforeseen other can one certify the ever incomplete and contestable body of scientific hypotheses and the formalism of the moral law as frameworks accessible to all humanity. Universality inheres, not in the certainty that everyone in a given territory is the same, but in the courage to address those who we know are *not* the same, who speak another language or play by different rules. Abstracting from the historical laws of the community, Kant derives the categorical imperative as a framework in which each subject is responsible to all others, not just those within her own community. The universality of this framework corresponds to the subject’s singularity, as opposed to the generality of the community with its common customs and fetishes.
The question remains whether this universalist framework retains a fetish of its own. It is not an easy question. People would not be autonomous if they could rely on a higher power to guide or ratify their decisions. Yet Kant considers the search for such a power intrinsic to human reason. By acting purposively, we conceive of a *telos* toward which our actions tend: “the highest good,” a state of being combining virtue and happiness. Since the highest good cannot be imagined as an historical possibility, we must instead posit that the soul progresses toward it infinitely, necessitating the soul’s immortality and the existence of God.43

These Ideas are the content of traditional metaphysics, and Kant affirms the human being as a metaphysical animal. Even scientific research requires a minimum of metaphysics, in that one must presume that nature is open to being understood by us.44 As moral agents, we go still further and postulate a teleology in nature that aims at our freedom.45 We regard nature as shaped to fit our understanding, and even organized to facilitate our autonomy. Yet though Kant affirms the necessity of such metaphysical commitments for life, he does not thereby affirm the truth of metaphysics.

We can summarize the Kantian stance thus: I know very well that there is no evidence for the existence of God, and that human reason cannot demonstrate the soul’s immortality or the teleology of nature, tending toward our freedom as its final cause. Nevertheless, I will live as if in these postulates were true because that is the only way to live autonomously and contribute to others’ autonomy. Kantian autonomy implies the precarious balancing act of upholding this *as if* without forgetting that it *is* an *as if*. This dimension of Kant’s thought becomes clearest in relation to the problem of the existence of God.

Kant’s definition of moral action excludes any action motivated by self-interested desires, which he calls “pathological.”46 Divine commands cannot be the source of moral action, because the threat of punishment or promise of favor in the afterlife activate such
desires. Unlike biblical commandments, Kant’s law has no positive content, but must be worked out in each context on the sole basis of the universality of the categorical imperative.

Kant aims to formulate a principle for which each subject can and must take direct responsibility. Accordingly, the speaker of the imperative is nobody but reason itself. But can this really be? Both versions begin with the imperious command: Handle so… Implicitly, positing God’s existence gives this dictate a voice. Once this is done, one has acceded to what psychoanalysis terms perversity: faced with the non-existence of the Other (or at least the impossibility of demonstrating Its existence), the subject nevertheless makes herself an instrument of the Other’s will. Such a conclusion clearly contradicts Kant’s intention; his aim is autonomy, not the heteronomy of divine command theory. The danger that weighs here on Kant’s critical edifice is the fragility of autonomy, and of reason as a guide to life. Reason and its law require divine support, yet once the divinity appears as lawgiver, all is lost.

The precarious position of Kant’s God was not lost on his early readers. In 1835, Heinrich Heine half-admiringly accuses Kant of deicide, predating Nietzsche by over four decades in his use of that trope. Yet Kant held that his philosophy would “deny knowledge (das Wissen aufheben) to make room for faith.” Kant removes the Deity as an object of knowledge, only to restore Him as an object of faith. Arguably, this second step requires the first, because a God whom we knew directly would leave no room for faith. Yet if one takes Kant at his word, it is hard not to conclude that he is advocating a faith without belief.

What is “faith without belief” but a formula for ideology? Expanding on an observation of Karatani’s, we may consider the cases of money and sovereign power. Cognitively, we know that money and the sovereign are relational entities that owe their power to the recognition we confer on them; it is in our practical relationship to them that their fetish character comes to light. Though we know that money is nothing but a means of exchange selected by convention to denote the value of other goods, this “nothing” becomes
something quite quickly in an economic crisis, when people of means frequently start buying up gold, the apparently natural form of money: value as a substance, not a relation. Likewise, the citizens of a republic know that their head of state is one of many available placeholders for a sovereignty held by the citizenry, but crises have pushed many a republic into the arms of someone who seems to radiate sovereign power as a personal quality, i.e. a dictator.52

Treating relational phenomena as if they were substantial, those who hoard gold or applaud dictators make explicit a mode of comportment essential to the functioning of value and sovereignty even in their familiar forms of fiat currency and republican government. It is tempting to assert what we know about value and sovereignty, scorning goldbugs and fascists as delusional. Yet this stance just insists on the ostensibly normal functioning of our symbolic concepts while disavowing their fetish content, which disturbs when it materializes in gold rushes and dictators. As long as value and sovereignty operate, so will their fetish character. Banknotes and politicians have a representative function, but these representations are never just representations; there is always a commitment inscribed in them. When the object of our knowledge depends on a fetish, it cannot be sufficient to “see what we know.”

Kant did not think these thoughts, but by staking both “theoretical” and “practical reason” on a stance of faith without belief, he gave us a framework in which to think them: the framework he called “critique.” Implicitly, the autonomous subject of Kantian critique is a subject of ideology—if “ideology” is what we call those commitments which frame what we see without being reducible to it. Kant’s thought points toward the speculative nature of our higher commitments, which could hardly motivate if they were based on knowledge alone. Critique reveals, not the faultiness, but rather the insufficiency of representation. There is no use adjusting the imaginary while leaving our symbolic commitments untouched.

We Are All Fetishists Now
If the Kantian subject is an ideological subject, then so is the capitalist subject whose symbolic world Marx outlines in the first chapter of *Capital*. For both thinkers, a commitment holds together the representations that comprise our experience. The difference between Kant and Marx lies in their attitudes toward this commitment. Whereas Kant recommends a metaphysical commitment to render our world coherent and help us realize autonomy practically, Marx argues that a quasi-metaphysical commitment already underlies our social world, maintaining its coherence and defining its liberal-democratic ideals. The revolutionary prospect inheres, not in stripping away misrepresentations to reveal the material truth underneath, but in working through that commitment which organizes our world both symbolically and materially, in order to replace it with a different commitment.

At the center of the symbolic world of capitalism lies the commodity with its “fetish-character” (*der Fetischcharakter der Ware*). As Sven Lütticken notes, Marx’s word choice reflects provocatively on Enlightenment convention, likening modern European consciousness to Charles de Brosses’s account of “primitive religion.” Delineating the commodity’s “metaphysical subtilties and theological niceties” (*metaphysische Spitzfindigkeit und theologische Mucken*), Marx applies a critique of religion to everyday life, explicating the theological dimension of the ostensibly secular world of the market.

Through market exchange, producers measure their labor against that of others, but only in the form of the value contained in their commodities. Capitalist society has no expression for the interdependence of different producers, aside from the quantitative measure of their products as units of value. Laborers’ social interrelation necessarily appears to them in the form of a relation between things.

Crucially, this appearance is an “objective appearance” (*gegenständliche[r] Schein*): it cannot be argued away by someone who knows what a commodity or labor really is.
Marxian critique delineates the enabling conditions for such concepts as value and abstract labor, delimiting economic reason just as Kant worked to delimit reason as such. Yet this act of framing does not dissolve what one sees inside the frame. Within the capitalist horizon, labor and its products necessarily appear in this light, without the benefit of a “thing in itself” with which to contrast their false appearance.

Marx’s distinctive insight is not that there is a hard material stratum underlying ideological illusions, but that the economic itself is a symbolic domain held together by a shared commitment. The value contained in commodities can be found nowhere in the material world, yet it organizes the acts of production and exchange that comprise capitalism. This fetish is not a dumb object to which people falsely ascribe agency, but a shared fiction holding the social world together, bringing measure to the incommensurate and making things legible. Identifying the commodity as a fetish, one neither frees oneself from fetishist practice, nor uncovers some truth that the fetish conceals. Presenting capital’s symbolic order as contingent, critique simply asserts the possibility of constructing a different order.

Through the lens of value, all commodities are commensurate, including labor power, which produces the other commodities. The existence of value entails that labor power will always be undervalued and treated de facto as a thing among things. Yet workers reproduce the social relation inherent to value simply by contributing to capital accumulation through their labor. Capital thus emerges as an “automatic subject” (automatisches Subjekt) that objectifies workers and their activity for its own purposes. In this role reversal, workers experience a loss of agency, but are not necessarily deceived:

To [the producers]…the relations connecting the labor of one individual with that of the rest appear, not as direct social relations between individuals at work, but as what they really are, material relations between persons and social relations between things.
Den letzteren [d.h. den Produzenten] erscheinen…die gesellschaftlichen Beziehungen
ihrer Privatarbeiten als das, was sie sind, d.h. nicht unmittelbar gesellschaftliche
Verhältnisse der Personen in ihren Arbeiten selbst, sondern vielmehr als sachliche
Verhältnisse der Personen und gesellschaftliche Verhältnisse der Sachen.  

Seeing their relations “as what they really are,” workers know how they stand toward their
work, its products, and other workers.  

So does bourgeois political economy, which knows that the values of commodities measure the labor-time expended in their production. Why, then, does this “scientific discovery” fail to dispel the “objective appearance” of capitalist social relations, the ideology of the commodity fetish? In the mirror of political economy, what is valid (gültig) only in capitalism—that productive activities constitute different quantities of one “abstract human labor” represented by commodities and measured in value—appears “as real and final” (endgültig) “as the fact, that, after the discovery by science of the component gasses of the air, the atmosphere itself remained unaltered” (als daß die wissenschaftliche Zersetzung der Luft in ihre Elemente die Luftform als eine physischale Körperform forbestehen läßt). In its scientific objectivity, political economy abstracts from its own practical presupposition: the generalized social commitment to value production, i.e. the continuance of that social organism of which it apprehends the natural law. Political economy grasps the connection between value and labor-time, the key to capitalist social relations, without indicating that the latter are subject to change. In capitalism, we relate to each other through the things we make and trade, yet the very concreteness of these relations lends them the semblance of permanence. And they are permanent, unless we change them.

The problem is not that we ignore what value represents, but that we fail to challenge the notion, and reality, of value. This is why, as Žižek writes, our fetishism of commodities is
a matter of practice, not theory. Like much ancient religion, “the religion of everyday life” is concerned more with orthopraxis than orthodoxy, making it harder to combat than any mere mystification. This truth is central to Marx’s argument, not peculiar to postmodernity or “cynical reason,” as Žižek sometimes suggests. It is not a question of whether symptomatic reading and the critique of “ideology as a naïve consciousness…still apply to today’s world.” From the standpoint of Marx’s text, these concepts have always been inadequate.

Marx looked to the proletariat, not his fellow young Hegelians, to bring German philosophy to completion by realizing its emancipatory promise. The workers’ movement, not Ludwig Feuerbach or Bruno Bauer, or even Marx himself, was to be the heir of Kant and Hegel. If critique is the self-reflective activity of interrogating the enabling conditions behind one’s own experience, Marx wants the proletariat to take critique to its culminating point, carrying out a social transformation by which it abolishes itself as a class.

We ought not to reduce critique to “reading.” Critique mediates between theory and practice by locating within theory the pivot point that represents a practical commitment. What political economy calls “value” is one such pivot point, enjoining us to labor and consume in accordance with the needs of capital accumulation. Once one has found this point, the task is far from finished, but moves onto the rougher terrain of transformative praxis, which must create and sustain other commitments.

Praxis is a contextual matter, dependent on material, institutional, and legal conditions. Most Anglophone academics contribute to the social reproduction of the white collar portion of the proletariat and the “managerial-professional” stratum that mediates between proletariat and bourgeoisie. When the reproduction of even the most privileged strata of the working classes is in crisis, preparing students spiritually for this crisis is as crucial to their self-interest as the transferal of professional skills, and for this reason can be done without the alienating moralism stereotypically ascribed to left-wing educators. Labor and social-movement
activism, teaching in extramural environments like prisons and contributing to forums that bring together academics and activists in attempts to combine theory and strategy are a few other forms of praxis in which intellectuals engage. Arguably, most of us also engage in career-building practices that subtly reinforce the status quo. Theorists on both sides of the “critique” debate advocate various forms of praxis, and I cannot here assess whose practices are most effective. I mean to focus rather on what the intellectual tradition comprising critique can tell us about what, in the encounter with literature, might motivate praxis of any kind.

Aiming to make critique capable of “capturing the lived experience of today’s global capitalism—and thus of changing it,” Lesjak implies that we can evaluate theory by its practical outcomes (257). Yet a tension remains between her ambition to “redeem the failure of ideology critique by reading better” and her awareness that “reading alone is never enough” (249-50). In this tension, Lesjak taps into a rich seam of post-Leninist reflection on the gap between revolutionary theory and practice. Theory, “at its most radical, is the theory of a failed practice,” she quotes Žižek as saying (249), in a line reminiscent of Adorno’s *Negative Dialectic*. While theory fails to be practice, yet depends on practice for its content, theory’s necessity arises from the fact that revolutionary practice has failed. These theorists provisionally embrace failure as the necessary condition for theory, which needs flexibility in relation to current practice because its earlier attempt to transform the world misfired.

Yet there is an aspect to Žižek’s habit of quoting Samuel Beckett’s call to “fail once, fail again, fail better,” that gets lost when Lesjak cites it as synonymous with Zadie Smith’s call to “read better” (241). Žižek uses Beckett’s line to summarize the lesson Marxists should learn from twentieth-century Communism: that one must act, knowing that one cannot anticipate the consequences of one’s actions. The Bolsheviks could not read themselves into history because the history they were reading told them the time was not ripe for revolution in Russia. Only by intervening in history could they hope to change its coordinates so as to
render possible what their reading told them was not. Today, “failing better” means avoiding the mistakes that let the October revolution devolve into Stalinism, aware that one will make “better” mistakes in their place. Because an unforeseeable future renders even the past only partially legible, one must relinquish the hope that the right reading will make the revolution happen by lining up adequately with the real state of things.68

Yet this same reality that renders reading insufficient has positive consequences for critical reading as well. Because we cannot step outside the social text we are “reading,” reading is inevitably partisan and oriented toward practice. To the living, the time is always out of joint as it was for the Bolsheviks. That there is no historical process we could analyze impartially, but only one that includes us as subjects within it, means that both our actions and our inaction face unintended consequences, but it also gives us a measure of agency. Latour may equate critique with a god’s-eye-view, but God could not do critique.

The View from the Inside

The subject of critique is a finite, historical subject. Materially and symbolically, she lives in the same world as everyone else. Ideology mediates social reality for subjectivity; more medium than object, it is not there to work through unless one inhabits it. Only a subject of ideology can be a critical subject.

Critique’s standpoint is not, as Latour thinks, external to its object. Only from a standpoint inside the social field can critical interpretation suggest transformative agency. That a fetish holds together the constructed world we inhabit does not imply the existence of a truer world beneath or beyond it. Yet because it is in the nature of a fetish to seem self-evidently necessary, it may be said to obscure the possibility of building a different construction. Critique means nothing if not the promise of restoring a dynamic relationship
between subjectivity and the social totality, making transformation conceivable while sociopolitical action works to make it actual.

Latour is right to think that for practical purposes a fetish is as substantial an entity as any other. Yet it does not follow that we have to leave each other’s fetishes alone. At stake is the point of contact between our representations of the world and our orientation within it. Whether the fetish that holds things together inspires affirmation or disavowal, it unlocks the dialectical relation between the subject and her social world. We relinquish the problematic of this truth when, in line with Latour’s injunctions against “iconoclasm” and “critical barbarity,” we decline to question our own and others’ guiding commitments.

Perverse or Romantic Reading

Paradoxically, this problematic of truth leads back to that of illusion. The practitioner of critique is not a cynic who prides herself on not being duped, but a thinker who remembers Lacan’s admonishment that les non-dupes errent. What might it mean to acknowledge illusion as a choice as well as a necessity? The Romantic period, poised between Kant and Marx, is rich in reflections on this question, the most famous being Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s dictum that the literary artwork occasions “the willing suspension of disbelief.”

Such self-conscious immersion in the as if of mimesis uncannily resembles the stance that Kant prescribes for ethical subjectivity. For many Romantic-era writers, receptivity to “beautiful semblance” (schöner Schein) is crucial to the task of navigating the actual, not because actuality is an illusion, but because it requires the supplement of illusion in order to cohere as a meaningful whole—or point beyond itself to what might be. If, as Friedrich Hölderlin claims, “the truest truth” (die wahrste Wahrheit) is one that includes “falsehood” (der Irrtum), then who could dispute that “those who are not duped, err”?
These Romantic claims for art’s truth illumine Lesjak’s praise for Eve Sedgwick’s practice of “perverse reading.” Following Sedgwick, Lesjak opposes to the placid pseudo-objectivity of “surface reading” a style of engagement in which the reader’s passional investment in the text is excessive and therefore “perverse.” She quotes Sedgwick recalling, “becoming a perverse reader was never a matter of my condescension to texts, rather of the surplus charge of my trust in them to remain powerful, refractory, and exemplary” (254).74

Lesjak portrays surface readers as fetishists who manage not to see what they know about the world, because their fetish, the text, blocks their view. In her theory, a fetish can only obstruct and separate, never bring into view or relate. Yet some of the rhetoric Lesjak endorses belies this theory. What could be more fetishistic than Sedgwick’s “articulation of reading,” in which, Lesjak writes, “texts are both fully here in their ‘resistant power’…and wholly elsewhere, in their ‘numinous power’” (254 ff.)? Both here and elsewhere, resistant and numinous, a bit of the material world that seems to emanate a power of its own, the text, as Lesjak sees Sedgwick approach it, resembles a fetish in that word’s original sense.

The style of reading Lesjak ascribes to Sedgwick is “perverse” in the sense I have discussed in relation to Kant’s metaphysical commitments. Putting her faith in a God in whom she does not believe, the Kantian subject courts perversity if she puts herself at the service of this God. The passionate reader likewise becomes a perverse reader when she endows a tangle of words with the independent agency that she knows it cannot possess, being a product of socially conditioned labor like anything else. A minimum of perversity inhabits any act of serious reading, by which the reader grants to the text the authority of providing her, at least potentially, with orientation in life.

Though the tonality of Sedgwick’s prose differs drastically from Adorno’s, her “perverse reading” fits the model that Adorno proposes for a mode of reading that recognizes the “fetish character of artworks,” which “Reflection… must equally comprehend…
effectively sanction...as an expression of [their] objectivity, and critically dissolve”

(Reflexion muss den Fetischcharakter ebenso begreifen, als Ausdruck ihrer Objektivität gleichsam sanktionieren, als kritisch auflösen). Not content to analyze the artwork as one social artifact among others, Adornian “reflection” also recognizes its fetish character as definitive, just as it is for the commodity. We cannot help but experience art and commodity value fetishistically, even while “critically dissolving” that experience in the awareness of both as artifacts. Reflective engagement with artworks thus brings us closer to the enigma of objective appearance, in which illusion is integral to what actually is.

In the museum, artworks organize space, setting their spectators into relation, as does the commodity in the social relations of capitalism. The social spaces that our labor has built foster and rely on our commitment to treat such things as artworks and money as splinters of the numinous among the material. Anti-fetishist critique presents such binding social commitments as someone’s commitment, bringing the objective appearance of a phenomenon like “value” down to the individual level long enough to inculcate a sense of agency over the world that our collective material and symbolic labor has produced. To posit the existence of a fetish means to ascribe to humans an agency qualitatively different from that of other elements of socio-material reality, such as the speed-bumps and speaking grilles of actor-network theory. This peculiarly human agency is what we call the subject.

We have seen how, for Kant, autonomy requires a lawgiver whom one is to identify as oneself and yet other than oneself. In the formalism of the categorical imperative, the subject’s every act contains an implicit address to other subjects present, past and to come. In this sense, an autonomous subject is always already “beside herself” or “implicated in lives that are not her own,” two formulations from Judith Butler that Lesjak considers a rebuttal to Enlightenment notions of autonomy (255). Far from an empty self-relation, “autonomy” is Kant’s response to the finite and relational character of human life, in which each act
concerns not only those present but also unknown others in an unforeseeable future. Yet Kant also thinks that the practical commitment to others implied by autonomy relies on the speculative commitment to an Other that appears to bring us into relation with them. Such a commitment, which Kant recommends in metaphysics and Adorno in aesthetics, resonates in a manner of reading whose “perversity” is richer even than Lesjak recognizes.

One must still make one distinction between the fetish and Kant’s God. What makes the artwork and the commodity fetishes, not stand-ins for the God of monotheism, is their this-worldliness. Though seemingly transcendent, the fetish belongs to this world, remaining open to human care and manipulation. Immanence is equally central to the enigma of literature when treated as transcendent. The Romantic novelist Jean Paul, who proclaims that poetic mimesis (Poesie) can so “transfigure” (verklären) the actual as to reveal the divine in the human, calls Poesie “the only second world in the present one” (die einzige zweite Welt in der hiesigen) (my translation). The preposition “in” hints at how literature parallels ideology. The ensemble of fictions and rhetorical constructions that make up literature do not form a composite representation of the real that supplants it, any more than ideology forms a counterfeit world, complete in itself and impervious to the actual. Inhabiting the same world we inhabit, literature, like ideology, augments that world.

The models of character and narrative we absorb from literary and other fictions become part of our life experience, and help orient us regardless of how we assess the ontological difference between those fictions and the rest of that experience. Mary Shelley’s readers carry the figure of the visionary “creating a monster” along with the rest of their mental armature, which they need, not only to “interpret the world,” but also to act in it—or “change it.” We know very well that such figures are fabrications, but nevertheless we orient ourselves by them. The efficacy of literature’s representations relies on readerly commitment—as does, if less blatantly, that of ideology’s representations. In literature, the
reading subject assumes the position she otherwise occupies as an ideological subject, but deliberately and with pleasure. In this way, literature affords readers practice in working through their ideological commitments.

Where does this leave us with regard to the study of literature? Not with any readymade method of analysis, nor a privileged set of spatial metaphors, whether of surface, depth, or proximity, to govern how we should read. Critique recommends rather an openness toward what the text may show us about ourselves as denizens of an augmented reality. For both author and reader, a literary work is an attempt to come to terms with the world, not through analysis, but by adding something to it. It is neither a mere artifact of dominant ideology nor necessarily an act of resistance to it, but an imaginative creation that augments our reality, much as ideology does. In literary works we can come face to face with our disavowed fetishes and reconnect with or question our guiding commitments. All of these possibilities are compatible with the spirit of critique, which does not mandate any particular technique, poised as it always is on the border between what we think and what we do.


4 Ibid.


10 Sedgwick, 141-2.

11 Ibid., 140-1.


13 Ibid.

14 Lesjak, 251; 253.


19 Žižek, They Know Not, 49.


21 Žižek, They Know Not, 28.


23 Ibid., 239; 243.

24 The phrase is Sedgwick’s: Touching Feeling, 8. Quoted by Lesjak, 255.


27 Lesjak, 251. Henceforth in parenthetical citation.


33 Ibid., 1. Karatani and Kohso render the phrase in the singular: “pronounced parallax.”

34 Karatani, 44-46.


37 Kant, *Werke* 10, 127; *Critique of Judgment*, 99.


Kant, Werke 7, 61; Groundwork, 230.

Karatani, 44, 52, 100 ff.

Ibid., 100 ff., 111.

Kant, Werke 4, 680-1; Critique of Pure Reason, 680.

Kant, Werke 4, 690-1; 10, 89-95; Critique of Pure Reason, 690; Critique of Judgment, 66-73.

Kant, Werke 10, 394-5; Critique of Judgment, 301-3.

Kant, Werke 7, 25; 42 fn. 5; Groundwork, 200 ff.; 215 fn. xviii.

Kant, Werke 7, 78; Groundwork, 243.

See notes 39 and 40.

Kant, Werke 4, 686-7; Critique of Pure Reason, 684.


Kant, Werke 3, 32; Critique of Pure Reason, 117.

Karatani, 271-2.

MEW 23, 85 ff.; Translated by Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling, in MER, 319 ff.


MEW 23, 85; MER, 319; Karatani, 140.
56 MEW 23, 87; MER, 321.


58 MEW 23, 169.

59 Ibid., 87; MER, 321.


61 MEW 23, 88; MER, 321-2.

62 Ibid (both).


64 Ibid., 29-31.

65 Ibid. 29.

66 MEW 1, 390; Translated by T.B. Bottomore, in MER, 65.


70 Ibid. 224; 242.


Lesjak, 254. Gila Ashtor argues that, by framing her assessment of critique in psychologizing terms, Sedgwick “misdiagnoses” her own intervention, which Ashtor considers a brief for “speculative” reading, as opposed to the “sociological” reading long normative in left-wing literary criticism. While “sociological” criticism begins from the primacy of the social system in order to illuminate the blind spots of the subject enmeshed in it, “speculative” criticism (including Sedgwick’s affect theory) considers the subject herself a “complex system” in need of elucidation. Because I hold subjects and the social totality to determine each other reciprocally, I mean to suggest the possibility of integrating “sociological” and “speculative” dimensions of criticism, which Ashtor considers incompatible. Ashtor, “The Misdiagnosis of Critique,” Criticism, 61, 2 (Spring 2019): 206 ff.


MEW 3, 535; Translated by W. Lough, in MER, 145.