

Bernes, Jasper. *The Work of Art in the Age of Deindustrialization*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017. ISBN 9781503602601. 231 pp.

McClanahan, Annie. *Dead Pledges: Debt, Crisis, and Twenty-First-Century Culture*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017. ISBN 9780804799058. 235 pp.

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Marxist literary criticism, that is, textual analysis informed by the conceptual apparatus of Marx and broadly committed to the praxis of socialist transformation, has known several phases of development since Marx and Engels first threw off their various literary judgements in occasional letters to friends and supporters. The First International was by and large indifferent to literary concerns, being driven by matters of organizational and institutional urgency, and the Second, given its positivist proclivities, proved only slightly more amenable to literary reflection. Lenin's essay "Leo Tolstoy and His Epoch" (1911), the peak of this intermittent attention, reads Tolstoy not for his form, but for his doctrine, underlining the underdeveloped state of the mediations between artistic forms and political and economic formations at this stage in even the greatest of Marxist intellectuals. The October Revolution, meanwhile, triggered a series of sea changes. Not only were the Formalists, the most advanced literary critics and theorists on the planet in the 1920s, profoundly marked by the realities of socialist transformation and at least nominally in step with Marxist theory, but their chief critics, the legendary Bakhtin Circle of Voloshinov, Medvedev, and Bakhtin himself, used Marxist conceptions of contradiction, struggle, and base vs. superstructure to push "formalism" into an entirely novel sociolinguistic terrain. At the same time, Trotsky's *Literature and Revolution* (1924) and his subsequent league with Surrealism guaranteed that there would be a future for orthodox Marxist literary studies even after the rise of a Stalinist bureaucracy and the consequent ossification of aesthetic standards in the Soviet Union itself.

Relatively mechanical and "economistic" applications of Marxist doctrine to literary study in Britain, by Christopher Caudwell and Alick West among others, stabilized in the 1930s under the conditions of a great "balance of powers" between the USSR, the rising forces of Fascism, and a crisis-riddled capitalist bloc. But such work was to have had less influence on subsequent generations than the combined effect of Leavisite criticism and troop radicalization at the front, as

with the early work of Raymond Williams. Meanwhile, the truly inventive and suggestive work of Kenneth Burke in the USA, while it was deeply informed by Marxian concepts, was simply too idiosyncratic to be compatible with the official organs of the communist left in the 1930s, whose consequent repudiation of it crippled any innovative American strain of Marxist criticism for decades. It was of course with the work of Lukács and its effervescent reception and application in the collegiate program of the so-called Frankfurt School that Marxist literary criticism assumed its characteristic Western face for the twentieth century: fiendishly theoretical, eclectic, and at one or two removes from a militant “praxis” cast into radical suspicion by Stalinization and National Socialism simultaneously. As Perry Anderson memorably put it, Western Marxism “came to concentrate overwhelmingly on study of *superstructures*,” including literary formations, precisely because it had become “inhibited from theoretical confrontation of major economic or political problems.”¹ The turn to cultural forms, literature paramount amongst them, was both a way of avoiding the burning questions of how capitalist accumulation and political insurgency mapped on to one another (or didn’t) during and after the worst crisis in capitalism’s history, and a way of smuggling those questions back in again under the aegis of what appeared to be cultural criticism. Indeed, for these thinkers, the logic of compensation went right the way down, discovering both ideological complicities and deformations in the literary text, as well as utopian stirrings against the grain of standardization and control: when the political Left seemed either dormant or absorbed, a Beckettian provocation could be felt to reignite the hopes for negation by way of forms and figures that had only the most distant relationship with the horizon of struggle.

By the time of the expansion of the tertiary sector in the 1960s, and the incorporation of a generation of radicalized Baby Boomers into the new faculties of institutionalized Humanities, Marxist Literary Criticism had evolved into a professional practice of sorts: reading texts against their overt ideological signals, probing for contradictions at the formal and stylistic levels, pinpointing crises of coherence in which underlying class conflicts were lit up by sparks thrown off by grating plates in the tectonics of social antagonism, and leavening the whole enterprise with generous helpings of Theory, borrowed laterally from

¹ Perry Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism* (London & New York: Verso, 1979), 75.

anthropology, philosophy, psychoanalysis, linguistics, and the social sciences. With the glaciation of political struggle in the advanced capitalist core in the 1980s, and the rise of neoliberalism as economic orthodoxy in the halls of government, institutionalized Marxist criticism evolved still further in the direction of the theoretical baroque, amalgamating strands from the dynamic French philosophers of so-called Post-Structuralism, along with certain “post-Marxist” tendencies, into a truly heady *mélange* of constituent elements. It was often said at the time that Marxist economists never read a page of Marxist cultural criticism, and conversely, that Marxist critics were generally economic illiterates. Apart from a few pages of *Capital, Vol. 1*, selections from the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, and the *Communist Manifesto* itself, most Marxist literary scholars were remarkably ignorant of Marx himself, let alone Hilferding, Sweezy, or Mandel.

The case of Fredric Jameson can be taken as the exception that proves the rule here, given that his uniquely omnivorous syntheses—straddling the most arcane French Theory, the Frankfurt School, German sociology, American architecture, British film theory, as well as the usual literary concerns—also availed themselves of certain important texts of Marxist political economy: Mandel’s *Late Capitalism* and Arrighi’s *The Long Twentieth Century* paramount amongst them; and so much more besides, including innovative work on the *Grundrisse* itself. But it was telling the extent to which these economic treatises ended up serving Jameson’s penchant for periodization and temporal schematics, rather than aiding him to determine any underlying laws of accumulation or the structural antagonisms of late capitalism. There was, that is to say, a certain “theorization” of radical economics at work in even the most imposing exponent of the craft of Marxist criticism at this time.

The result of this tendency, over decades of instruction and publication, was a generation or two of young radical literary scholars for whom the essentials of Marxist economics were more or less unknown, with the exception of the famous fetishism of commodities and the related concept of reification. Remarkably *au fait* with the complexities of Deleuzian “conceptual personae,” with Lacan’s “ethics of the real,” and with Althusserian interpellation, Marxist critics might not be able to discriminate between monopoly profit and average profit, or between real abstraction and real subsumption. But with the upswing of political activity

in the advanced capitalist countries after 2000—the long sequence from the Battle for Seattle, down through Occupy and the Arab Spring, to Black Lives Matter and beyond—this kind of theoretical ignorance was put through the mill of intensifying practice. Slowly but inevitably, the sober heritage of Marxist critiques of political economy returned to the reading lists of intellectuals keen to make sense of the crisis of 2008; and new arguments about the value form, the declining rate of profit, circulation and logistics, communization and expropriation, became lively topics of debate.

We can see the fruit of this new kind of engagement in two back-to-back publications from the impressive “Post 45” imprint of Stanford University Press, by young scholars forged in the political crucible of the Bay Area in the late 2000s and early 2010s. In distinct but overlapping ways, Annie McClanahan and Jasper Bernes are demonstrating in these volumes what has become of Marxist literary criticism after the so-called “death of theory” and the rise of anticapitalist political insurgency the world over, but with particularly vivid inflections in Northern California. Each takes a very specific problem endemic to late capitalist social existence—the rise of the debt economy, in McClanahan’s case, and the decline of the classical industrial sector, in Bernes’s—to make a persuasive case that the logic of cultural production has, more or less subtly, shifted in determinate ways in response to economic dynamics at once “outside” the cultural domain, and yet insistently immanent to its protocols. And in both cases, what is most tellingly absent is any reliance on the discourse of the Master—be he Badiou, or Agamben, or Žižek, or Latour, or whomever you wish. This is a Marxism stripped of the serene blandishments of theoretical wisdom, and returned to the icy cold calculations of profit and loss, where, as the *Manifesto* memorably puts it, the ruling class has “left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous ‘cash payment’.” Handed back to the stark realities of the economic sphere, Marxist criticism gains a much harder edge, and finds it a good deal harder to locate what Raymond Williams liked to call the “resources of hope.”

Given the eminent role of the financialization of debt-based assets in the so-called “global financial crisis” of 2008-2011, the case for the “state of the debt” in contemporary culture is an obvious one to make. McClanahan’s argument turns elegantly on the ways in which debt (its marketing, expansion, and promotion to

the role of economic driver in a world of declining profits) has reshaped the very habitus of social responsibility and personhood over the last thirty years. What she adumbrates is an “ambient context” of crisis that we inhabit, up to our eyes and ears, such that a nascent class consciousness could be said to be brewing in our collective disenfranchisement:

debt—as a figure for credit that is unpaid, defaulted, foreclosed, bankrupted, written off, unredeemed—is the economic form of crisis: of a period in which no one can pay. For our contemporary era of debt, crisis is an invaluable historical hermeneutic, compelling us to anticipate limits, to imagine alternatives, to welcome collapse, and thus to resist the “end of history” triumphalism of late capitalist ideology in boom times.²

Since we inhabit this crisis at the point of its inescapable maturation—literally no one can pay—but not yet its terminal convulsion, McClanahan suggests that our situation is “autumnal”; works of art and literature can still be produced in such times, and these assume a vital function:

The aesthetic forms surveyed in *Dead Pledges* are the cultural expression of our shared autumnal condition. They thus allow us to reckon with the ways crisis has transformed our sense of personhood, our understanding of property, and our experience of social belonging. (15)

The forms that she surveys are hardly masterpieces. Undistinguished “novels” (that don’t really deserve the name) by Jonathan Dee, Adam Haslett, Gary Shteyngart, and Martha McPhee are treated to extensive analyses because they portray characters and situations that literally have to do with the debt crisis: mortgage lenders, brokers, Federal Reserve presidents, real estate investors, and so on, in situations of moral and fiscal uncertainty. Conceptual artist Mathew Timmons’s textual piece, *CREDIT* (2010) is considered alongside a poem by Timothy Donnelly, and Cassie Thornton’s site-specific photographic work, to draw out questions of personification and the matter of agency and character in the contemporary scene of debt. Work by photographers Yves Marchand, Romain

² Annie McClanahan, *Dead Pledges: Debt, Crisis, and Twenty-First Century Culture* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017), 15.

Meffre, T. J. Proechel, Todd Hido, James Griffioen, John Moore, and others, is scrutinized against the economic, familial, and spatial devastations wreaked by the foreclosures of 2008-2010, to measure its representational efficacy and fetishism against the sense of uncanniness it generates aesthetically. Finally, schlock films *Drag Me to Hell* (Raimi, 2009), *Dream Home* (Pang, 2010), *Mother's Day* (Bousman, 2010), and *Crawlspace* (Stolberg, 2013) push the uncanny quotient of those documentary photographs into the domain of pure horror, once again to track the “themes” of mortgage speculation, real estate lending, and the threat of foreclosure at the level of narrative representation.

The principle of selection is a loaded one here: McClanahan is drawn to works that, in one way or another, specifically address the economic urgencies of the present, and so obviate the often messy question of “mediation” (of which more anon) in the relationship between “base” and “superstructure,” to employ an exhausted metaphor. These are works that always and already ask to be read as lenses on the faltering economy; not works that need to be deciphered, or desublimated, as so many symptomatic fantasy structures generated by underlying economic determinations. In that, they resemble the happy hunting ground of a much earlier type of Marxist criticism, which found a natural home in the works of Naturalists and Realists who were predisposed to making economic processes the deeper subject of their works. Indeed, the novels under investigation here are far from experimental in form or style, and operate in a kind of “zombie naturalist” mode anyway. The photographic works under scrutiny, too, assume a foursquare objectivity with regard to the abandoned domiciles, factories, and streetscapes left in the wake of financial crisis and deindustrialization: alienation is glimpsed here quite literally—either in the key of melancholy, or of the uncanny, but never through an optic that deliberately looks awry or askance the ruins of our post-contemporary lifeworld. It is the same again with the films subjected to McClanahan’s analysis, all of which involve narrative and characterological structures explicitly concerned with real estate, domesticity, and the market in mortgages.

The analysis itself is extraordinarily good. Her reading of *Drag Me to Hell*, in particular, practically fizzes with hermeneutic energy and brio, as it puns wittily on the concept of liquidity vis-à-vis the copious amounts of saliva and ooze in Raimi’s superbly distasteful opus. But everywhere, the focus is sharply maintained

on the many ways in which space, personhood, and property have had to be rethought and reimagined after the credit crunch, as exemplified by this broad spectrum of works. McClanahan's great strength is the wealth of detail she brings to her portrait of the period itself, with excellent distillations of existing literature on the concept of debt, its financialization prior to 2008, and the crisis itself. Her grasp of economics, in the radical as well as the more official senses, is truly masterful and she does an outstanding job of clarifying its stakes for cultural analysis. Indeed, the way she handles the relationship between this context and the various texts she investigates is exemplary for the "new" Marxist literary and cultural criticism today: no longer comfortable with invocations of theoretical demigods or tired homilies on the commodity, her hermeneutic method thoroughly guides us through the webs of determination that bind models of indebtedness in fiction to the existential and structural debts that define our social horizon.

There are, however, drawbacks. Paramount among these is the loss of attention to what an older generation would simply have called "form." In the discussion of the feature films, for example, there is essentially no mention of many of the formal elements that define these works' aesthetic protocols: shot length, editing style, colour tonalities, camera movement, depth of field, and so on, all the usual compass points in the business of film analysis are summarily rejected in favour of the narrative dimension, which therefore becomes the horizon of these films' formal characteristics for the duration of the analysis. Much the same could be said for the photography under scrutiny here, which never yields more than the most cursory technical information (film stock, shutter speed, etc.). Things are somewhat different in the section given over to reading the novels, thanks to one specific formal element at play here, namely characterization. McClanahan's work is at its absolute best when it is thinking through the reversal in fortunes that she wants to show has been suffered by the notion of literary (and non-literary) character after the collapse of "credit" as a measure of personal worth and economic potential, and the rise of "debt" in its place. Drawing on work done by Doreen Fowler, Margot Finn, Deirdre Lynch, Catherine Gallagher, Ian Baucom, J. G. A. Pocock, and others, McClanahan argues in a superlative critical turn that, credit being to character what logistics is to war, its replacement in the general economy by structural and personal indebtedness leads to serious deformations of the very sense of character today:

The credit-crisis novel, by contrast, proves ultimately incapable of saving the individuals at the center of its narrative from a kind of ontological attenuation or even annulment and thus ends up utterly bereft of the kinds of full, unique, authentic characters—and the ideological individualism—typically ascribed to the contemporary realist novel.

This, and the analysis that goes to back it up, is all very good. However, there is finally no true reckoning with “realism” as a formal category, despite this telling revision to its deeper structure. Because, ultimately, *form* just doesn’t seem to have the kind of interpretive weight that it used to do in the literary critical enterprise.

And this is a serious turn of events, which we can see recapitulated on expanded historical ground in Jasper Bernes’s riveting account of the fate of *The Work of Art in the Age of Deindustrialization*. Where McClanahan tackles the situation of the consumer—of debt, its marketing and financialization, and the way it is lived—Bernes is concerned with the question of work, or of labour as such, in the long post-WWII transition from an industrial to a de-industrialized US economy, and its concomitant features: the rise of the so-called services, of affective or immaterial labour, and above all the spread of lower-level managerial or white-collar positions in the expanding symbolic economy, with whom writers and artists can be said to have more than a passing affinity, even as traditional blue-collar roles are phased out and relocated to Mexico and China. Focusing on the 1960s and ’70s as the key transitional period in the arts and letters of the Western superpower, Bernes is concerned to demonstrate that the “one-dimensional” Organization Man of the 1950s—that paradigmatic imago of bureaucratized corporatism—was incompatible with the rapidly declining rate of profit in the 1960s, and completely redundant after the Oil Crisis of the 70s; and that artists and writers were peculiarly sensitive bellwethers for systematic changes about to sweep through the economy and social life more generally.

Far from wanting to tout any hoary theory of the artist-as-prophet, Bernes is working with a remarkably sophisticated and resilient new critical model which will doubtless have a lot of traction in the years ahead. In essence, it amounts to the claim that writers and artists, so often obliged to take on clerical and other white-collar work to support their art, participate in a general social experience

that they are able, through conspicuous applications of formal reflexivity, to focus into images of heightened alienation as it spreads through the sphere of work:

In this book, I argue that the various literary and artistic experimental cultures of the 1960s and 1970s helped to articulate, though certainly not to create, these new qualitative complaints [against conformity and obedience] and demands [for autonomy and flexibility]. In reacting against the same bureaucratic, “one-dimensional,” conformist, and hierarchical society as their fellow workers, artists and writers participated in a widespread expression of counter-systemic values (visible in the counterculture, in the women’s movement, and in the antiracist struggles of the period).³

Far from revolutionary in effect, however, it turns out that such efforts by the “symbolic class” resulted in contributing to a larger transformation of the capitalist economy itself, along the lines charted exhaustively by Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello in their monumental *The New Spirit of Capitalism*: desperate to offset the guttering profitability of large-scale firms, capitalism in the 1960s and ’70s discovered ways of converting the “artistic critique” of homogeneous and hierarchical systems of labour into the broom of a more streamlined workplace, defined by flexibility and what we would call “precarity,” but what it trumpeted as “autonomy and self-management and the promise of an unbounded liberation of human creativity.”⁴ That we still live in the long shadow of this transformation underlines the striking relevance of Bernes’s book, which thus argues that “the critique of labor posed by experimental writers and artists of the postwar period became a significant force behind the restructuring of capitalism, by providing important coordinates, ideas, and images for that restructuring” (18).

Neither purely resistant, nor utterly cynical, then, what Bernes wants to show is that the “set of themes and ideas” set in motion by workplace rebellions and modulated into durable forms by writers and artists needs to be read both ways at

³ Jasper Bernes, *The Work of Art in the Age of Deindustrialization* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017), 8-9.

⁴ Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London & New York: Verso, 2007), 170.

once. For it is the nature of capitalism to generate the conditions for and then to absorb its own most radical critique as the very grounds for its expansion and reinvention on a higher level. The symbolic work of writers and artists is thus neither exactly insurgent nor complicitous in this dynamic, but genuinely Janus-faced: profound and resourceful in their complaints against the enervation and desiccation of human potentials under the hegemony of market relations and alienable labour-powers, yet succinct and colourful enough to compel recognition by the enemy, and provide a script for the new regime. It is a set of theoretical propositions that leads Bernes to some very compelling formulations:

Art's autonomy does not lie in being separate from the world of labor but from being connected to it: it can select, reject, or negate certain technical processes, on the one hand, or push some to the point of failure, on the other, revealing their constitutive contradictions. [His model] does not rely on simplistic notions of correspondence, homology, or reflection. Art does not simply reproduce what it finds in the world but reconstitutes and reconstellates it to form models of prospective futures. This speculative process makes art into a sort of social laboratory. (33)

To what extent Bernes recognizes the Adornian temper of these fine reflections remains a moot point, given the steely aversion his work shows to any of the canonical names of Critical Theory. As he steers us through adroit and deeply intelligent readings of Frank O'Hara, John Ashbery, Hannah Weiner, and Bernadette Mayer, Bernes shows how the poets predict and then react to a

new organizational philosophy [...] in which productive dynamism and creative disorder are valued over stability and in which continuous restructurings, reassignments, mergers, and decompositions are celebrated as a way of remaining agile in the face of a volatile terrain marked with wild fluctuations in asset values and supply and demand. (100)

And yet, again, with some passing exceptions, these “themes and ideas” are kept strictly to the domain of what we would once have called “content analysis”—even in the case of the famously elliptical and abstract Ashbery, about whose sense of cadence, syntactical grandiloquence, rehabilitated old verse forms, and so on, Bernes remains stubbornly silent. The standout exception to this rule (which

Barnes himself acknowledges: “The preceding discussion has been largely oriented toward the content of the poems [...]”) is a truly penetrating analysis of Ashbery’s “hallmark indeterminacy of point of view” in a section entitled “Free Indirect Labor”—which makes a genuine contribution to historico-formal poetics (72-81). But otherwise, with regard to all the poets being discussed, the verses are squeezed to yield content in the old sense: veritable nuggets of information or lexical data, that contribute to the argument already underway by confirming this or that turn in the larger economic process.

This is not to suggest that Bernes’s readings, of Bernadette Mayer’s *Memory* (1972) in particular, are not exemplary and path-breaking in discovering overlaps and homologies between, say, clerical and reproductive labor, which involve “both logical and temporal succession, where each moment is the necessary presupposition of the others both in cognitive, logical terms and in terms of their actual unfolding in time” (125). But it does present limits to the analysis, since the various contradictory elements that go into the work never seem to be properly focused through the intriguing grammatical, syntactical, idiomatic, and rhythmical structures that make Mayer, or Wiener, or the Flarf poems examined in the fifth chapter, distinctive as aesthetic force fields.

My sense is that this loss, of a considered formal dimension in both books, is a consequence of the shared, generational retreat from Western Marxist theoretical concerns and the redoubled openness to economic literature as such. McClanahan’s remarkable fluency with microeconomics and the literature on debt, and Bernes’s versatility with Boltanski and Chiapello, information theory, and the literature of post-industrialization, mark a significant shift in the orientation of Marxist literary criticism: away from the Humanistic disciplinary fields privileged by the Frankfurt School and its progeny (very much including aesthetics as such), and toward the actualities of price and profit, surplus and turnover, downsizing and circulation, that give the economy its true character. This can only be welcomed and admired, since it offers a truly fine-grained and dynamic account of the material determinations that make literary and artistic practice possible in the first place. Moreover, both writers are surely correct to stipulate that these practices are helplessly involved in the business of debt restructuring and deindustrialization to begin with: films, and commissioned photographs, have a more or less direct relationship with a debt-driven economic

form; and writers and artists are very often casual (or precarious) workers in the symbolic economy of late capitalism. Pretenses of autonomy have all withered away, leaving the “arts” finally indistinguishable from the various processes they pretend to represent.

And so, perhaps, form just isn’t what it used to be, and it never will be again. It is arguable that our inherited skills and techniques for “reading” poems, prose works, and even audio-visual creations—that full encyclopedia of formal terms and devices—is either redundant or worse. One aspect of the shift represented by these two volumes is historical and perfectly straightforward; it has been summarized lucidly by Fredric Jameson:

For there is a question whether, today, in postmodernity and globalization, in the universal reign of the market and of a cynical reason that knows and accepts everything about itself, ideology still takes on its once classical form, and ideology-critique serves its purpose any longer. [...] What is paradoxical is that the crudest forms of ideology seem to have returned and that in our public life an older vulgar Marxism would have no need of the hypersubtleties of the Frankfurt School and of negative dialectics, let alone of deconstruction, to identify and unmask the simplest and most class-conscious motives and interests at work, from Reaganism and Thatcherism down to our own politicians: to lower taxes so rich people can keep more of their money, a simple principle about which what is surprising is that so few people find it surprising any more, and what is scandalous, in the universality of market values, is the way it goes without saying and scarcely scandalizes anyone.⁵

If form, traditionally, was the aesthetic re-processing and re-presentation of ideological givens, then the shredding of ideological subtleties in the engine-room of neoliberalism spells the ruin of form as such, which has nothing left to do with what it finds, all too vulgar and explicit, on the trading floor of everyday life. Flarf can here stand as a sign of the times: form is the merest act of “framing” what already exists in a state of unredeemable self-evidence. And if form no longer works to salvage some utopian dimension from the hell of “the universal reign of

⁵ Fredric Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic* (London & New York: Verso, 2009), 285.

the market,” but is today always some shrugging capitulation to a force it knows not how to resist, then reading for form is a quaint anachronism as well.

There is, however, a more theoretical dimension to this shift, which we can rehearse by returning to one of the key moments in twentieth-century radical aesthetic thinking. In his infamous letter to Walter Benjamin of 10 November 1938, Adorno writes in a summative objection to the drift of Benjamin’s work on Baudelaire:

Unless I am very much mistaken, your dialectic lacks one thing: mediation. Throughout your text there is a tendency to relate the pragmatic contents of Baudelaire’s work directly to adjacent features in the social history of his time, preferably economic features. [...] I regard it as methodologically unfortunate to give conspicuous individual features from the realm of the superstructure a “materialistic” turn by relating them immediately and perhaps even causally to corresponding features of the infrastructure. Materialist determination of cultural traits is only possible if it is mediated through the *total social process*.⁶

At this level, we can see that the temptation to do what McClanahan and Bernes are doing in their books is an old one, and not necessarily a symptom of a radical transformation in the ground of capitalist accumulation itself. Adorno’s case for mediation, for the interpretive passage of every cultural detail through the scrim of the capitalist totality, is also an argument for form—for just as the various interlocking “economic features” of social history can only make sense in relation to the “total social process,” so, too, individual features of works of art (verbal or otherwise) can only attain true significance thanks to the constellation created by its formal construction. More important still, the only correct way to relate details of daily life to the details of cultural objects is to effect that impossible passage through the totality—a passage vouchsafed by the existence of the aesthetic form itself.

⁶ Theodor Adorno, letter to Walter Benjamin, 10 November 1938, trans. Harry Zohn, in Adorno, et al., *Aesthetics and Politics* (London & New York: Verso, 2007), 128-9.

I would say that Adorno's point is at least vestigially valid today, and claim for evidence the fact that each of these two books is strongest at the very point where it does what he is recommending: mediating the stark relations through questions of form. McClanahan's extraordinary observations on the fate of character in an economy of debt are so good because of the lengths they go to in excavating the conditions of character in a credit-driven economy: a densely determinate formal term mediates the relationship between quirks of characterization in this or that novel, and the informatization of credit ratings. So too with Bernes, the single most powerful and perceptive moment in his frequently brilliant discussion is the passage where the rhetorical orchestration of complex perspectival shifts in Ashbery's free indirect discourse mediates between the decomposition of managerial authority in the workplace, and a hesitation in the structure of address in a specific poem. To the extent that, elsewhere, both writers tend to prefer more or less "direct" confrontations of the "pragmatic contents" of the works they examine with "economic features" of the contemporary economy, they fail this Adornian test and lapse into a kind of illustrational rhetoric whereby aesthetic artefacts become excellent instruction manuals for reading the flailing mechanics of late capitalist accumulation.

No doubt that is what both really want their new Marxist criticism to be: guide-books to the contemporary struggle. Certainly, the long epilogues to both books—McClanahan's on student debt, and Bernes's on the disappearance of work—are outstanding models of what engaged radical discourse should look like: incandescently intelligent, profoundly informed, and moving. The question remains, however, to what extent the works that either author looks at have been read as confirming a pre-existent hypothesis, rather than explored for the unpredictable aesthetic dynamisms that allow the arts to do more than reflect, refract, or reframe the processes that are their deeper substance.