Dialectics Standing Still: \(N+1\), history, and the political consequence of literature

Ever since Plato’s expulsion of poets from the Republic, aesthetic theorists have been debating the relationship between literature, theory, and politics, and the six-year-old literary magazine \(n+1\) sends the debate into a contemporary spin. Founded, according to the editors, in response to the Iraq war, the magazine’s first issue announces itself as a forum uniting literature and criticism in the service of the “reinvigoration of civilization” (19). The editorial statement that opens the inaugural issue, “Negation,” asserts that “civilization is the dream of advance,” and the issue implies that its blend of criticism and literature will promote the infinite advancement alluded to in the title \(n+1\) (3). Such language evokes a rather conservative, even military model of civilization advancing, homogenizing and accruing ‘culture’ as it goes. But a second, latent theory runs against this image of progressing civilization, insinuating itself even on the magazine’s cover in the conflict between the title \(n+1\) and the issue’s title, “Negation.” The magazine’s “second text,” to borrow a term from Althusser, suggests that history is dialectical, proceeding not in a singular forward march, but in the inconsistent dance of opposition (28). The contradictions internal to “Negation” invite an active re-reading of the magazine’s model of history and its conception of the relationship between the literary and political fields; in the moments where the text falters or skips over a snare in its own textual weave, a provocative picture begins to emerge, in which the serial literary magazine itself serves
as a model and agent in a simultaneously synchronic and diachronic relation between literature, politics, and history.

According to statements by the magazine’s founding editors, the title \( n+1 \) is a direct rebuke to teleological theories of history. Contrary to messianic or idealistic notions of an eventual transcendence or “end” of history, the 'civilization' dreamt by \( n+1 \) charges dynamically into an uncircumscribed future. The particular version of teleology negated by the title, according to the editors, is the neoconservative ideal associated with Francis Fukuyama's declaration that we are on the horizon of the “End of History,” and that we have only to await the “universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government” (“n print”; (Fukuyama 4). In opposition to this “End of History” thesis, \( n+1 \) proposes to “revive progress [...] to say, ‘The heroic age isn't over. It starts now’” (Greif, qtd in Glenn, “Partisans Renewed”).

The magazine's insistence upon serving cultural progress is somewhat undermined, however, by its own deliberately anachronistic form, and especially by its self-stylization in the model of older literary magazines such as The Partisan Review. While the editorial piece called “The Intellectual Situation” denounces the Dave Eggars coterie for “rejecting the new, and the true” in its use of “old innovations, consciously obsolete maneuvers from earlier moments of creative ferment,” “Negation” itself eschews contemporary technological innovations and models itself in both form and content on the so-called New York Intellectuals of the mid-twentieth-century (7). This rather mixed message about intellectual 'progress' and innovation suggests that cultural change cannot simply be signified by a progressive equation, after all. Moreover, the concepts of “progress” and “civilization” are freighted with ideological baggage, as the final essay in the issue actually acknowledges explicitly, when it refers to the “ideology of
progress” central to that essay's characterization of despotic “liberal capitalism” (Glenn “Black Iron Prison” 158-159). Though the ideal of progress guiding $n+1$ is, as the editors have implied in discussing Fukuyama, not equivalent to the bourgeois ideal of capitalism, the title nonetheless evokes a repressive picture of linear and homogeneous, forward motion. In the words of Karl Marx, “How, indeed, could the single logical formula of movement, of sequence, of time, explain the structure of society, in which all relations coexist simultaneously and support one another?” (Marx 106). The picture of homogenizing cultural advancement suggested in the title is both conservative and imperialistic, in its apparent elision of diversity and opposition.

The ‘second text’ of “Negation” begins to speak through the moment of rupture signaled in the expression, ‘the ideology of progress,’ which urges us to reconsider the Editorial Statement’s dream of advance. Although the editors' statements explaining the sentiment behind the title $n+1$ encourage a straightforward reading of this sentence as an unexamined endorsement of both 'civilization' and 'advancement,' a second, active reading might catch upon the word dream. At the top of the following page, the beginning of the magazine proper, “The Intellectual Situation” begins with the words, “Wake up late” (5). The narrative voice is a vague variation of inner monologue, ostensibly indicating the subjectivity of a disembodied, collective editorial narrator in the process of awakening; the words might also be an injunction, though: wake up. It is perhaps better to awaken late than to continue sleeping, resting in the tranquil dreams of an advancing “civilization.” As the narrator awakens into an awareness of the intellectual situation, he begins to decipher signs that refer to a historical inheritance more complex than a progressive series of cultural accretion.

The figurative “awakening” that opens the issue with an assessment of the “Intellectual Situation” is a series of nostalgically-conditioned readings of texts that represent the
contemporary literary-cultural scene. The narrator “wake[s] up late,” with a headache, and begins to assess his first text, *The New Republic*. In this appraisal, the publication apparently presumes a passive intellectual inheritance from the New York Intellectuals of *The Partisan Review*, and this presumption of cultural continuity has proven false. “If only they had allowed more positive individuality,” the essay broods, “cultivated something new, and still kept an old, dignified adherence to the Great Tradition, running continuously to them (as they hoped) from the New York Intellectuals, whose ashes were in the urns in the *TNR* vaults if they were anywhere” (6). *The New Republic* may guard the ashes of the New York Intellectuals, and traces of the Great Tradition flicker through its present efforts, but these flickers do nothing more than expose *The New Republic*’s own inadequacies. The primary charge that “Negation” levels against *The New Republic* is that it celebrates the quality of intelligence rather than the act of thinking: its writers have elevated “an attribute, self-satisfied and fixed” above thought, which “adds something new to the world” (6). The charge amounts to an accusation that the publication practices a mystified epistemology, in which an ostensibly fixed attribute functions as an abstract ‘essence’ preferred over practical action. In its own self-satisfaction as the heir to the Great Tradition, *The New Republic* has passively surrendered the actual work of original production.

The other so-called literary ‘friends’ whose publications aspire to a similar cultural function as *n+1* are the Eggersards, whose literary empire is likewise haunted by “a long tradition behind them” (7). The Eggersards take hold of the “paratextual games […] of Vorticism, Dada, and Surrealism” and empty them of “their classic interest in a search for truth,” substituting “the avant-garde hope for […] transcendence of present conditions” with a degraded ideal of “childhood as a way of life” (7-8). The Eggersards' exaltation of the naïveté of the figure evoked in the title *The Believer* is an even more pronounced form of the mystification practiced
by *The New Republic*. Just as the long tradition behind *The New Republic* exposes its substitution of a mystifying ideal of intellectual essence rather than action, the evaluation of the Eggersards in light of their predecessors exposes the former as having elevated mystification itself to the posture of the ideal, and “Negation” points out that this ideal of “mere belief is hostile to the whole idea of thinking” (8). In its appraisals of the present representatives of the intellectual situation, “Negation” casts both as unwitting accomplices in a general mystification of the contemporary, and the narrator's *awakening* entails his drawing lingering traces from a rather mythological past into his reading of the present.

The language of dreaming and awakening produces a faint echo in “Negation” of the historical consciousness described by Walter Benjamin in *The Arcades Project*, his sprawling, fragmentary, and incomplete attempt to provide a materialist history of the 19th Century. The correspondence is more suggestive than precise, and it does not place “Negation” within the materialist historical tradition described by Benjamin, but rather illuminates a murmuring affinity between fragments that represent a mystified, dreaming experience of life. In one passage, Benjamin urges us not to treat the past as the *origin* of the present, but rather as an image bursting into the present, making a constellation that he calls a 'dialectical image':

> It’s not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words, image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is a purely temporal, continuous one, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: is not progression but image, suddenly emergent. (Benjamin *Arcades* 462: N2a,3)

To live with this arrested dialectic, in which the “what-has-been” flashes through the “now”, is to awaken from the dream of “civilization,” and to practice what Benjamin calls “the art of experiencing the present as waking world, a world to which that dream we name the past refers
in truth” (Benjamin *Arcades* 389: K1,3).¹ In the same way that the relation between waking life and dreams is not a strictly causal, linear relation, Benjamin’s conception of “dialectics at a standstill” severs the present from a clear, successive temporal inheritance; such a relation between past and present may exist, Benjamin suggests, but to *awaken* means to see a more revolutionary relationship between the “now” and history. As Slavoj Zizek explains Benjamin's thought, the traces that emerge in this arrested dialectic have been censored from the official, continuous and homogeneous narrative Text of history, and they may be 'redeemed' through their articulation in the awakening present (Zizek 143). This awakening can alter the narrative of history, creating, as Zizek writes, “a new Text by means of which the stifled past 'will have been’” (Zizek 144). A measure of belief in this legacy Benjamin calls a “weak Messianic power” is hinted in *n+1*’s extreme self-admiration, which suggests that the magazine believes its own “coming was expected on earth,” or ought to have been (Benjamin *Illuminations* 254). Moreover, *n+1*’s pursuit of “the new, and the true” blends curiously into its efforts to revive, or redeem, the “Great Tradition” of the New York Intellectuals.

The correspondence between “Negation”’s project of ‘awakening’ and its ideal of reading is more than allegorical. Like the aesthetic tradition running from Plato through Kant and Schiller, Matthew Arnold, Karl Marx and contemporary cultural theorists, “Negation” implies that the core social power of literature rests in its dual potential to veil or awaken society. This special power of the literary frames the failures of *The New Republic* and the Eggersards in more urgent terms: by contributing to a faith in “essences” like “intelligence” and “belief,” the allegedly-progressive publications are supporting ideologies that depend upon the passivity of

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¹ For Benjamin, the social world is dreamlike partially due to the phantasmagorical effects of commodity-centered capitalism. Though the politics are not as clearly established in *n+1*, there is further correspondence between the “unveilings” undertaken by “Negation” and Benjamin’s conception of the “dreaming collective,” the populace sedated by the fantastical effects of commodities.
uncritical faith. Throughout the first issue, the magazine worries that we have become ideologically disarmed, that we have fallen prey to a “demented self-censorship” (3). The issue first alludes to this paralyzing, internalized obstruction to thought in the Editorial Statement, and the idea of self-censorship is later refined in an essay that explores the consonance between Iranian literary censorship and the “more sublimated pressures” of American culture. Our problem, according to the essay, is that we have lost our critical ability to read, and the essay counsels us to return to great novels by writers like Henry James and Vladimir Nabokov in order to “learn to read again,” with an “attentiveness [which] must get us past the veil of everyday signs.” The implication is not that we will thus read James and Nabokov better, but rather that we too will wake up, through learning to read the present. This literate awakening entails, in Benjamin's words, “dream interpretation” of the text of the present, and we learn this art through engagement with literary texts (Benjamin Arcades 464: N4,1).

The differences between “Negation's” use of a dreamlike past and the use prescribed by Benjamin are instructive, as they indicate a different political posture toward history. The central difference is clarified in the issue's essay that most directly addresses the question of history, Mark Greif's “Mogadishu, Baghdad, Troy.” Here, Greif works toward a theory of what many call 'post-modern warfare' through a three-way juxtaposition of Homer's Iliad, the battle in Somalia chronicled in Black Hawk Down, and the American engagement in Iraq – the Benjaminian “now” contemporaneous with the essay. The essay asserts that “history works by analogies,” and this concise sentence encapsulates the approach to history that runs throughout the imaginary 'second text' of “Negation” (Greif “Mogadishu” 133). History 'works' when it is put to work, when analogies are established between images of the past and the present. The point of this “work” is not to redeem failed revolutionary possibilities of the past, nor to understand the past
in its uncensored, discontinuous and authentic form; rather, the “work” undertaken in “Negation” treats history as a dreamlike image within the text of the present, putting a mythological history to literary use. The method is less appropriate to Benjamin’s effort to “articulate the past historically,” than to an effort to articulate the present historically (Benjamin “Theses” 255). In such an approach to 'reading' the present, it is entirely appropriate to draw texts like the journalistic Black Hawk Down and the Iliad into a constellation with the “now.”

This theoretical model indicates a structuralist and literary approach to the political field, in which the field of history and politics is compressed into our own textually-comprehended synchronic moment. As Roland Barthes observed, in a world established in structuralist terms, a fact asserted by historical narrative “can only have a linguistic existence, as a term in a discourse […] the referent is aimed for as something external to the discourse without it ever being possible to attain it outside this discourse” (Barthes “Discourse” 17). If we concede that we are planted by structuralism in a field of synchronic analysis, history can only be accessible to us as somewhat dubious signs, images flashing through our present. As many have pointed out, such a model does not solve the problem of truly accounting for history.² Not only does it disavow “real” knowledge of the past, but the greater political danger is that it is incapable of adequately accounting for historical change and the possibility of a different future. In the words of Derrida, “It is always something like an opening which will frustrate the structuralist project. What I can never understand, in a structure, is that by means of which it is not closed” (Derrida 160). This is a problem that a magazine dedicated to an ideal of 'progress,' however contradictory, must not

² Derek Attridge and Geoff Bennington’s introductory essay to Poststructuralism and the Question of History, “Posing the Question,” provides a good overview of the challenges posed by poststructuralism to historical discourse, and the criticism these apparent challenges have attracted to poststructuralist theory.
disregard. If we approach social relations, and history, as a text, we must ask what sort of readers we are. If our affinity lies with structuralism, our text cannot see its possible future, and we cannot plot an alternative structure. If we read the text through the lens of post-structuralism, our 'history' lacks a center, and we will never comprehend our story: it is an iterative model of infinite deferral – a negation of a different sort – and it seems both unstable and antithetical to progressive 'advance.'

The form of a literary magazine itself offers a model of progress that might escape this bind. The identity of a serial magazine oscillates between its synchronic present, the direct subject of each particular issue, and the magazine’s iterative future. It defies structuralist insistence upon synchronic analysis and challenges dichotomous categories like Roland Barthes' distinction between 'work' and 'Text': “the work is a fragment of substance, occupying a part of the space of books (...), the Text is a methodological field [...] the work can be held in the hand, the text is held in language” (Barthes “From Work to Text” 156-157). For Barthes, the material 'work' “functions as a general sign,” and the evasive, infinitely deferred 'Text' courses through it, as a “signifier” understood to be the “deferred action” of meaning (158, 162). While the work is closed, the Text is open, a field awaiting unregulated play. The Text, finally, it is “that space where no language has a hold over any other, where languages circulate (keeping the circular sense of the term)” (164). \(N+1\) is insistently material, which makes it a willful anachronism in the digitized literary present. And yet, in producing the magazine as a quantifiable unit, an aesthetic object and commodity, its insistence upon spatial occupation creates the power of a specifically material, literal unification of circulating voices. A magazine establishes a “space” of sympathetic but unharmonized voices, a synchronic whole that nonetheless formally embodies the fact of change, gesturing always toward its material successor. Seriality becomes a playful
evasion of what Barthes would describe as the petrification of the Sign; the magazine defers, as
discursive signifier and as material sign, and thus offers another textual analogy by which to
approach the questions of history and social change, without negating the influence of
structuralism. This quality is clearly shared by serial magazines in general, but n+1’s particular
engagement with questions of inheritance, progress, and the aesthetic makes the correspondence
between form and the subject of history especially suggestive. Each issue of the combative little
magazine is itself, in a sense, “dialectics at a standstill.”

N+1 suggests its dialectical identity in the interactive play of titles on the cover of its first
issue. The dialogue between the title reference to an infinite serial progression and the specific
issue's title, “Negation,” produces a soft version of dialectics, of progress through opposition.
The final page's 'Endnotes' offer the strongest indication that the magazine pursues a dialectical
model aspiring not only for progress, but for the teleological end that n+1 otherwise disavows:
“Some day, perhaps, we too will run topless into that Western wind, heedless of consequence,
celebrating the good life. But as a child’s personality begins to form when it can say, You are not
me, so we’ve begun by saying, No. Enough” (182). These final words of “Negation” offer an
image of paradise on the other side of progress, a celebration of the “good life” evocative of the
transcendental final synthesis to which many dialectical projects aspire. The reference to the
“Western wind” ostensibly refers to an Abercrombie & Fitch catalog image of a topless woman
bracing herself against the wind, but the echoes of Shelley’s Ode to the West Wind are equally
powerful, and pertinent, given the passage’s capitalization of the ‘W’ in Western. For Shelley,
the Western wind is a symbol of politically significant artistic inspiration, an inspiration that uses
the poet as a “lyre” through which to sing prophecy to “unawaken'd earth” (Shelley). The
preceding pages of “Negation” attempt, in the various registers of editorials, essays, and fiction,
to awaken the earth, and the image offered on the final page of “Negation” may be seen as a mystically prophetic glimpse of the awaken'd earth: a “good life” in which sensuous experience is united with the creative imagination, and life and art are no longer divided. The image exudes the sentiment of messianic, hopeful teleology, and the text asserts that the work that must be undertaken to pursue this ideal future is dialectical, beginning with the defiant concluding words, “No. Enough.”

The moment that the magazine identifies as the origin of “personality,” is also, in psychoanalytic terms, the original moment of alienation, when the fantasized Mirror-phase “ideal of unity” with one’s surroundings and caregivers necessarily ends and the self-censorship central to the subject’s formation begins (Lacan Ecrits 18). In Lacanian psychoanalysis, the subject is formed as such through this self-alienation, through the rift that the signifying network establishes between a subject and her desire; the articulation of “You are not me” is only possible as the subject falls into the alienating field of language. But the Endnotes’ fantastical “good life” should not be seen as dream of jouissance, in which the subject recovers desire through the “radical effacement” of the symbolic order (Zizek 132). The signifying network is still present, in the Western wind mediating the Real, and the revolutionary goodness of this fantastical image is the fact that the signifying network is poetic. The Endnotes offer the dream of a society in which the “Law” is no longer the strong arm of ideology, but rather the sensuous arm of poetry.

Again, the aesthetic functions for n+1 as both a model and an agent. The poetic image that closes the magazine benefits from another juxtaposition with Benjamin:

In every true work of art there is a place where, for one who removes there, it blows cool like the wind of a coming dawn. From this it follows that art, which has often been considered refractory to every relation with progress, can provide its true definition. Progress has its seat not in the continuity of elapsing time but in its interferences. (Benjamin Arcades 474: N9a,7)
For Benjamin, art is itself a dialectical agent, a negator of the dominant historical and political narrative, and true ‘progress’ depends upon the creative disruption of homogeneous models of advancement. “Negation,” too, sees creative projects like its own as dialectical agents. The strongest case it makes for the political function of the aesthetic, however, comes in the final full-length essay, which sketches an unusual alliance between Baudelaire and Philip K Dick. The essay “Black Iron Prison” denounces “liberal capitalism” as a system contingent upon its containment of citizens in an “invisible prison,” a network of ideologies such as the narrative of continuous ‘progress.’ Literary agitators, “unteleported souls” like Baudelaire and Philip K Dick, interfere with such ideological narratives, transforming their outsiders’ distrust into an aesthetic disruption of the capitalist “chimera,” the sci-fi puppet-show that Dick once called “the daily tyranny of our immediate world” (Glenn “Black Iron Prison” 164). Progress toward any ideal future is propelled by art, by its interferences with the dominant signifying network, and artistic moments of dialectical arrest can drive us toward an awakening into an aesthetically-conditioned present.

In an exchange of emails during the early brainstorming stages of the magazine's development, the editors discussed an eventually abandoned essay idea they began referring to as “Choose Your Anachronism.” The essay was supposed to develop, in Greif's words, “a theory of history we can live with” (Greif “N+1 response MG”). Marco Roth described it as being “in praise of untimeliness” (Greif “N+1 Responses”). In a sense, the dialectical work of “Negation” inscribes this unwritten essay in the magazine’s subtext, offering a model of dialectical progress as a process of awakening, in which anachronisms are deliberately chosen, and phantasms from the past flash at will through the present. In n+1’s dialectics, the dreamlike unreality of the past does not negate the possibility of a radically different future, and the issue’s subtextual essay
indicates that historical change depends upon those artists and poets, and magazine editors, willing to disrupt the slumber of the unawaken’d earth, teach us the art of reading, and infuse us with the poetic law.
Works cited


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