

INTRODUCTION

FIGURING ANACHRONY

KURT GÖDEL AND OTHER LIARS

THE METALEPTIC METHODS OF MODERNITY

Stepping into the chain of causality is, of course, possible
only when the result does not destroy its own cause.

—John L. Casti and Werner DePauli,
Gödel: A Life of Logic (160)

These opposite things partake of one
At least that was the theory, when bishops' books
Resolved the world. We cannot go back to that.

—Wallace Stevens, “Connoisseur of Chaos”

THE SEVENTH LABOR OF HERCULES

Continuing a discussion initiated in the preface, I bring together four seemingly dissimilar ideas in this chapter to consider how they might share a common figural shape. I begin with a modern reenvisioning of the classical “liar’s paradox” before moving on to paradoxes arising at the heart of nearly every recent and not-so-recent venture in critical theory. From there, I turn to an extended consideration of the various rhetorical guises of metalepsis, arguing that each essentially refigures the same temporal problematic. Finally, I revisit the rhetoric of modernism, which assumes its own metaleptic structure. Each of these related sections (logical, interpretive, narratological, historical) previews what, over the following six chapters, will become specific discussions of the backward temporality of poetic form and reading. But before getting there, I begin with two stories.

The first is a tale about a student who, like many his age, did not quite know what he wanted to do with his life. Initially, he thought that he wanted to be a lawyer. Although he did not have any money to pay for a tutor, the student, Euathlus, found a teacher, the Sophist Protagoras, who was willing to help him anyway. All Protagoras asked was that when Euathlus won

his first case, he would repay the teacher for his troubles. After learning everything his teacher had to impart, the indecisive Euathlus decided to give up the law for another vocation, doing so before winning his first case. As per the letter of the agreement, he would not have to repay his debt. Incensed, the crafty Protagoras sued his former student to claim payment for the lessons. He told the court that it should find in his favor, but even if it should find for his student, that would in turn mean that Euathlus had won his first case and would thus now have to pay. Euathlus, at this point schooled in the intricacies of logical–rhetorical argumentation, countered, claiming that if the court ordered him to compensate Protagoras it would mean that he still had not won his first case and was thus not obliged to pay.¹ Hence the comportment of the registrar’s office to this day.

My second story is more recent. It also involves a disputation among friends. The stakes are much higher, but in this instance, there is no official adjudicating body. Criticizing Richard Rorty for his neopragmatism and Stanley Fish for his interpretive communities, which each qualify “truth” in terms of social practice, Robert Scholes heads to the forum, clarifying an earlier mischaracterization of his position:

This concern about getting things “right” is an essential aspect of our academic discourse, without which we could not operate as we do. I see no reason why we should avoid thinking of it as a concern for “truth,” nor do I see how our study and teaching could continue without the fundamental assumption that some descriptions of things are better or worse than others, more or less *accurate*, more or less *fair*, more or less *comprehensive*, more or less *clear*. How could we do without judgments of this kind?² (49)

Craftily, Scholes writes, “My afterward is an acknowledgement that I got something wrong that I must now attempt to set right” (49). By taking the “high ground” of conceding some points to his opponents in disputation, Scholes effectively hijacks the debate. If Rorty and Fish were to reiterate their positions and agree that Scholes’s revised argumentation were indeed more judicious, they would in effect be admitting that there existed a “better,” more “accurate” form of reasoning—what Scholes and others call “truth.” Scholes seems correct—logically speaking, at least—but what happens if he still has some detractors? That very possibility would imply that the reasoning, which he admits he got wrong in part, would not be “truth” but would be logically appealing to certain interpretive communities. And

isn't the logical game-i-ness of the whole enterprise precisely what Scholes is arguing against? Surely, in the "real world," one has to be right, just as Protagoras would either have to win or lose his case?

I turn to these stories because they illustrate a 2500-year-old logical gridlock, which has many guises—the most famous of which would have to be its simplest: the liar's paradox.³ Depending on whom you believe, the liar's paradox originates in the sixth century B.C.E. with Epimenides or two centuries later with Eubulides. It is claimed that Epimenides, a Cretan, once said, "Cretans are always liars." If he were telling the truth, his statement would have to be false; if he were lying, his statement would have to be true. The liar's paradox, an apparent logical impossibility, is essentially of the same form as both W. V. O. Quine's fancy "*yields a falsehood when appended to its own quotation yields a falsehood when appended to its own quotation*" and the simpler kindergarten lessons of "never say never" (except now) and "every rule has an exception" (except this one). Such paradoxes illustrate a problem in self-reference with the collision of referential and metalinguistic expressions. Essentially, the liar's paradox assumes the metalinguistic as its object but applies the rules of the referential, which can be hard to avoid when thinking of the "big" epistemological laws of the universe.⁴

Although this logical problem is old, it does undergo an important modern spin. Along with the crises of culture, the crises of politics, the crises of nation, the crises of self, and the crises of technology in which the discourses of modernity always seem to find themselves comes a very interesting academic crisis in the halls of modern logic where, on a widespread and fundamental scale, the imperative to order leads to disorder. The commotion starts quite innocently with the *Begriffsschrift* (concept script) of Gottlob Frege who, at the end of the nineteenth century, attempted to devise the first self-sufficient logical system since Aristotle. Frege's project—the beginnings of axiomatic predicate logic, in which the whole of mathematics could be derived from simple logical statements—was based on a notion of what was later called "naïve" set theory.⁵ Set theory, the logical study of collections of objects and their members, became the mathematical rage at the end of the nineteenth century with the work of Georg Cantor and others. Sets—which are sort of like those folders on our computer screens—are manners of classifying, of ordering. Along with mathematical sets, such as the set of positive numbers and the set of negative numbers, there exist more common sets, such as the set of mammals or the set of books on my dining room table. Some sets' members overlap: 42 is a member of both the set of positive numbers and

the set of even numbers. Some sets are empty (the set of mammals on my dining room table), and some contain only one member (currently the set of mammals under my dining room table).

There are many questions one might ask about the properties of sets, and one of the more interesting ones has to do with self-containment. Sets can be said to either contain themselves as members or not. Imagine the theoretical set of sets with more than one member. This set would contain the set of mammals (which has more than one member) and the sets of whole and rational numbers (which also have more than one member). If we were now to take a giant step back, we might ask the same question about the theoretical set of sets with more than one member. As we have just established, this metaset has more than one member, and as such, it must also be considered a member of its own set. Here, at the metalevel where one considers self-referential sets, naïve set theory and consequently part of Frege's logical project begin to break down. Corresponding with Frege on the eve of the publication of the *Begriffsschrift*, Bertrand Russell—both a devotee and critic of Frege's logical methodology—noted a problem that ran to the core of Frege's set theory. Russell's paradox, as it came to be known, asks the inverse of the question I asked above: Is “the set of all sets that do *not* contain themselves as members” a member of itself? The answer is simple: It is if it isn't, and isn't if it is. The consistently inconsistent logic here is the same as that of the liar's paradox. According to Russell, Frege's problem was that he did not discriminate between types of sets.

A few years later, Russell and Alfred North Whitehead presented their version of set theory in a collaborative tome on the logical foundations of mathematics, the *Principia Mathematica* (1910–1913). They avoided the problem of self-referentiality by claiming that sets were always of a “higher” type than their components.⁶ Even though Russell was able to exile the matter of paradox, he was never able to construct a complete logico-mathematical system on one level that would be self-legitimizing, consistent, and complete. As it turns out, no one could. Contrary to what Russell believed, paradoxes are not the illegitimate children of logical systems; instead, they are the necessary conditions for the functioning of any given system. At the Vienna Academy of Sciences conference of 1930, Kurt Gödel presented his groundbreaking incompleteness theorems to an audience that, for the most part, could not yet appreciate its implications. The following year, he published his theorems as “On Formally Undecidable Propositions of Principia Mathematica and Related Systems” (*Über formal unentscheidbare Sätze der Principia Mathematica und verwandter Systeme*

J). The initial crux of Gödel's work hinged on a likeness he found between mathematical and metamathematical functions—the way numbers relate to each other and the way we talk about how they relate to each other. He was then able, in essence, to “map” Russell and Whitehead's theorems onto his “Gödel numbers” and onto the system of math itself. “The Epimenides [liar's] paradox,” writes Douglas Hofstadter, “is a one-step Strange Loop But how does it have to do with mathematics? That is what Gödel discovered. His idea was to use mathematical reasoning in exploring mathematical reasoning itself” (*Gödel* 17).

The two significant theorems are stated as Proposition VI and Proposition XI. Proposition VI asserts that “there are arithmetical propositions which are undecidable (i.e. neither provable nor disprovable) within their arithmetical system” (1), and Proposition XI maintains, “If the formal system P is ‘consistent,’ its ‘consistency’ is unprovable within P” (24). The first theorem proves that given an arithmetical logical system (which includes additive and multiplicative operations), it is possible to create a statement that is at the same time true yet not provable within the system. The second theorem proves that a consistent logical system will necessarily never be complete, and thus cannot prove its own consistency within its own system. Frustrating the consistency and provability sought by David Hilbert and others in modern reformations of mathematical logic, Gödel's incompleteness theorems opened a “newly found chasm irrevocably separating provability from truth” (Hofstadter, “Foreword” xiv). The theorems, though not quite paradoxes (they themselves are true and provable), share many similarities to paradoxical forms. The implications of these theorems for epistemology are as revolutionary as they are startling, to the point that they allow themselves to be read in both a negative and positive manner. “The unwritten aim that the physical sciences have set themselves since Isaac Newton's time cannot be attained,” Jacob Bronowski declares, because “the laws of nature cannot be formulated as an axiomatic, deductive, formal, and unambiguous system which is also complete” (124).

Nonetheless, life goes on. Ludwig Wittgenstein, for one, could not understand all the hubbub:

It is very queer in a way that this should have puzzled anyone—much more extraordinary than you might think: that this would be the thing to worry human beings. Because the thing works like this: is a man says “I am lying” we say that it follows that he is not lying, from which it follows that he is lying and so on. Well, so what? You can go on like that until you are black in the face. (206–7; qtd. in Goldstein, 196n10)

Indeed, we could. Contrary to some misconceptions, Gödel's incompleteness theorems do not abrogate truth. They do just the opposite, affirming that truths exist even though they might not be verifiable. The theorems illustrate not only that systems cannot be sheltered from paradox, as Russell believed, but that the figure of paradox is at the center of every grand epistemological venture.⁷ Still, just because one can make logical exercises or games out of a paradoxical bind does not mean the bind cannot or ought not be solved. Sometimes it is logic that reenters the situation to resolve things, and sometimes it is simply power. A judge will have to decide Protagoras's case, despite its illogic, and as we know, in the real world Buridan's ass never goes hungry or thirsty.

I began this chapter with logical paradoxes, because, as I explore in the following sections, they help explain self-referential binds of critical theory, the paradoxical weirdnesses of the diachronic trope metalepsis, and the contradictory impulses of modernist studies. I hope to reimagine such paradoxes in their temporal guises, thereby shedding some light on the figural relationships among philosophy, history, and literature or, more precisely, the way we must talk about each. That certain conceptions of modernism, challenges of literary criticism today, and a problem of logic may share the same metaleptic structure is not surprising. Figures configure the very possibility of our understanding. This is not to say that they are not political, ideological, or historical, but that they complicate those mediating social narratives by showing that such frames may already presuppose their own formal shapes—politics works like x , ideology works like y , history works like z

METHODS

Theory wants to provide the Key—or keys—to All Mythologies, to all literary mythologies. It would be the biggest trooper around.

—Valentine Cunningham, *Reading after Theory* 122

Given the number of fights it didn't start but, against its mother's best advice, had to show up for anyway, we might rework Cunningham's comment and say that theory is also the biggest trooper around.⁸ Some of its biggest scraps have come not from the *New York Review of Books* but from within. Consider the following statements:

Brecht, last night: “There can’t be any doubt about it any longer: the struggle against ideology has become a new ideology.” (Benjamin, “Conversations” 97)

The television of the Tet Offensive of 1968 exercised an emotional as well as an intellectual influence on new historicism’s eventual foregrounding of a structural tension between synchronic and diachronic history; its intense concern with the particular, its deployment of anecdotes, its distrust of official voices, and its ambivalent relationship to the historical “real.” (Kamps 161)

Another group of Nietzsche’s readers has been disturbed by the fact that his view that there are no facts but only interpretations seems to generate a self-referential paradox. If every view is in fact an interpretation, this would apply to [Nietzsche’s argument, which thus] seems to have refuted itself. (Nehemas, *Nietzsche* 65)

The two major Marxian studies [Lukács’s and Marcuse’s] of Hegel have for one thing argued convincingly that Hegel’s “conception” of absolute spirit is little more than a symptom of a historical situation in which his thinking could go no further. (Jameson, *Political Unconscious* 51)

If someone tries to turn our awareness inward . . . our whole organization resists—just as, for example, the oesophagus and the urethra resist any attempt to reverse their normal direction of passage.⁹ (Sigmund Freud, letter to Albert Einstein, March 26, 1929)

What I have always found particularly disquieting about contemporary American Pragmatism—of Rorty and Fish, for example—is that people who attained their positions of professional eminence by engaging in spirited debate with other members of the academic field . . . have . . . suddenly turned and rejected the idea of a system of procedures and body of knowledge where argument is possible.¹⁰ (Culler, “In Defense” 118)

I have already made the point elsewhere that Lyotard's theory of the end of grand narratives is itself another grand narrative.¹¹ (Jameson, *Singular Modernity* 5)

I think it's absolutely on target to take a stand against the discourses of essentialism . . . But *strategically* we cannot. Even as we talk about *feminist* practice, or privileging practice over theory, we are universalizing—not only generalizing but universalizing.¹² (Spivak, "Criticism" 166)

What do we make of the state that allows its teachers to assign Louis Althusser's "I.S.A." essay in a classroom, or the bookstore that puts Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things* on a shelf labeled "Poststructuralist Theory," or Stephen Heath who would include Roland Barthes's "The Death of the Author" in Barthes's collection *Image-Music-Text*.¹³ One could go on. . . . On one hand, we might see these instances as engendering a formal paradox of self-reference, as each points out that a system, which ought to be consistent in itself, arrives at a dead end when asked to legitimate itself through its own rules. On the other hand, we might view these paradoxes as a metaleptic problem of causal time, as each master narrative listed above hopes to excise temporal particularity, specifically the particulars of a future occasion for which it can neither account nor predict through its own methodology. This is an amusement that can be played with any manner of epistemological system, sometimes cleverly, sometimes not. Now and again, the criticisms turn into ad hominem attacks, as though Nietzsche were not aware that he offered an interpretation, as though Jameson were not aware of his own historicity. At best, such criticisms point out paradoxes or aporias in methodological systems; at worst, they are games that even third graders learn how to play with chores they do not feel like doing.

But we need to do our chores. That History can be considered history does not alleviate its ethical imperatives. That feminist practice must be theorized does not excuse its nonpractice. That one cannot successfully produce a system of meaning that is both complete and consistent within the symbolic system of language does not mean the system is not true. Sociologists are familiar with how a related ethical problem has been articulated by Karl Mannheim, here, in the context of an "observer's" own historically mediated ideology: "Thought is bound by the social- and life-situation in which it arises. It is clearly impossible to obtain an inclusive insight into problems if the observer or thinker is confined to a given place in society" (72). Clifford

Geertz, discussing what he called “Mannheim’s paradox,” shows how the problem Mannheim posed is not the only epistemological impediment—one must also consider the practical dilemma that the supposed paradox causes for scholarly analysis:

The historical process by which the concept of ideology came to be itself a part of the very subject matter to which it referred has been traced by Mannheim; the realization (or perhaps it was only an admission) that sociopolitical thought does not grow out of disembodied reflection but “is always bound up with the existing life situation of the thinker” seemed to taint such thought with the vulgar struggle for advantage it had professed to rise above. . . . But the more [Mannheim] grappled with it the more deeply he became engulfed in its ambiguities until, driven by the logic of his initial assumptions to submit even his own point of view to sociological analysis, he ended, as is well known, in an ethical and epistemological relativism that he himself found uncomfortable. (194)

As Wittgenstein said of the seemingly paradoxical nature of Gödel’s theorems, “Well, so what? You can go on like that.” Fears of subjectivity do not abrogate responsibility to either scholarly objects or subjects. One can hope for movement away from logical constraints, for more self-critical readings of already self-critical texts, and for what Theodor Adorno, in his most Hegelian/anti-Hegelian moment can call the dialectical end of the dialectic: “Without a thesis of identity, dialectics is not the whole; but neither will it be a cardinal sin to depart from it in a dialectical step. It lies in the definition of negative dialectics that it will not come to rest in itself, as if it were total” (*Negative* 406).

This was simultaneously the most unexpected and the most predictable thing Adorno could have written. The title of his tome, *Negative Dialectics*, itself a redundancy of negation, challenges the notion of dialectics as “achiev[ing] something positive by means of negation”—Hegelian *Aufhebung*—and it can be (ironically!) summarized by some words from his introduction: “Total contradiction is nothing but the manifested untruth of total identification” (*Negative* xix, 6).¹⁴ That two negatives never make a positive is not something new for Adorno. Such ideas echo and explain the famous line from *Minima Moralia* that “the whole is the false,” stated later in the same text in a more playful way: “If a dialectician, for example,

marked the turning-point of his advancing ideas by starting with a ‘But’ at each caesura, the literary scheme would give lie to the unschematic intention of his thought” (*Minima* 50, 85). But in his epistemological-ethical critique of totalizing systems, Adorno continually elevates philosophical analysis over a materialist one while also, in a seemingly incompatible manner, refusing to see the dialectic as something that can or ought to resolve contradiction. But there is still a logical problem for Adorno, which causes him to turn his critique on himself. A dialectical system that flouts totality must still paradoxically embrace its own antitotalizing method totally. “Once dialectics has become inescapable,” he writes, “it cannot stick to its principle like ontology and transcendental philosophy” (*Negative* 136). Thus, after another 250 or so pages, Adorno can boldly claim that “it lies in the definition of negative dialectics that it will not come to rest in itself, as if it were total” (*Negative* 406). To claim that everything is dialectical, Adorno must posit a historical end to dialectics itself, which would then undo his initial claim. It is an impossible position and one that exploits the logic that positive and negative systems are both positive or totalizing in their systemization and negative or paradoxical in their application.

It is not the dialectic, negative dialectic, or the no-longer-dialectic that concerns Paul de Man, as he navigates around the nonsynthesis, noncontradiction of what he calls, in his critical book of the same title, “blindness and insight”:

The contradictions, however, never cancel each other out, nor do they enter into the synthesizing dynamics of a dialectic. No contradiction or dialectical movement could develop because a fundamental difference in the level of explicitness prevented both statements from meeting on a common level of discourse; the one always lay hidden within the other as the sun lies hidden within a shadow, or truth within error. (*Blindness* 103)

The book flashes its lens on various scholarly approaches, which cannot have critical insights without being blind to their own aporias. Rhetorically aware of his own umbra, the author is hesitant, as if he were constantly aware that any critical offering of his hand would itself be eclipsed. Stepping out of the shadow would be dangerous. As Richard Klein writes,

de Man would undercut his whole enterprise—as he himself knows very well—by positing a standpoint of truth, an eminent center

from which he would then be able to legislate the principle, the law, the truth of critical discourse—and ultimately of all interpretation. De Man wants nothing of the kind. (“Blindness” 35)

Truth is not the threat, though. It is decisiveness. That is why de Man is forced to “act *as if* the text were a phenomenon and *as if* he were its privileged observer despite the fact that he denies the privilege in principle” (“Blindness” 35; emphasis in “original”). Already on uncertain ground, the author takes up (before its time) Gayatri Spivak’s exhortation to “deconstruct Derrida’s text beyond what Derrida as controlling subject has directed in it” (“Translator’s Preface” lxxvii). He turns to *De la Grammatologie* and offers what Klein calls “the most uncanny, the most insane, the most bizarrely interesting critical encounter imaginable. . . . [A] vertiginous movement, an Apollonian frenzy. . . . His text goes slightly mad, the way philosophers get drunk, or stoned” (“Blindness” 34). Turning his sights on Derrida’s Rousseau, de Man writes,

The only literal statement that says what it means to say is the assertion that there can be no literal statements. . . . Derrida had to interpret [Rousseau’s] chapter on metaphor as a moment of blindness in which Rousseau says the opposite of what he means to say. . . . Rousseau’s text had no blind spots: it accounts at all moments for its own rhetorical mode. Derrida misconstrues as blindness what is instead a transposition from the literal to the figural level of discourse. (*Blindness* 133–39)

Turning the Derridean model against itself, de Man rightly and wrongly critiques Derrida’s presumptions of insides and outsides, specifically taking Derrida to task for presuming a presence in the literal language of Jean-Jacques Rousseau rather than seeing the rhetorical mode of Rousseau’s text for what it is. Understandably and mistakenly, though, de Man takes Derrida at his word, presuming a literal “inside” in what might very well be Derrida’s rhetorical mode, where instead of critiquing Rousseau’s philosophy of language, Derrida is simply reperforming Rousseau’s literal/figurative moment.¹⁵ It is de Man, the blind reader, who imposes a literalness in Derrida’s rhetorical text. But wait. Even here, I must stand corrected, for I am now misreading a literalness in de Man, when his chapter was really all along not a critique of Derrida’s blindness but its own re-performance.¹⁶ But wait, I, too, was just playing this game, and it is you who are misreading

a literalness in me. Deconstructive critique necessarily anticipates its own temporal “blindness” and builds into its paradoxical structure the very “inside-outside,” “presence-absence,” “literal-rhetorical” binaries it continually dismantles. Even a nonsystematic “system” like Derrida’s, which stresses temporal mediation, depends on a method of back-reading, which would effectively ground the system in a future (though “negative”) teleology.¹⁷ De Man, naturally, can critique deconstruction via its own “system”; it is just that, once he is there, his critique will fall prey to its own unreason. Such is the logic of the temporally deferred paradox, an algorithm of sorts, which depends on the literal presence of an intentional agent. “Most uncanny, most insane,” indeed.

Epistemological critiques aside, deconstruction has been criticized most strongly (by those who understand it) on its ethical grounds. In what could only be the most seductive of glances, Terry Eagleton writes of

the madness and violence of deconstruction, its scandalous urge to think the unthinkable, the flamboyance with which it poses itself on the very brink of meaning and dances there, crumbling away the cliff-edge beneath its feet and prepared to fall with it into the sea of unlimited semiosis or schizophrenia.¹⁸ (“Marxism” 480)

Barbara Johnson could point out how de Man’s figural suppression of the person—an actual Rousseau and not “Rousseau as text”—is almost a haunting of bodily return, “as though the operations of personhood could not be eliminated but only transferred” (*World* 45).¹⁹ This is not even to mention the aging elephant in the room—the general handling of the de Man affair itself, an etiological unreason, which blamed the originary “deconstruction” for cultivating de Man’s earlier unpardonable writing.²⁰ But deconstruction is more diplomatic than it is often given credit for. In a telling essay that brings Derrida and de Man together, Cynthia Chase hypothesizes,

someone challenges the authority of philosophical discourse by pointing to the fact that it’s determined by linguistic constraints, constraints such as abstract ideas consisting in metaphors or dead metaphors. But just that point is simultaneously a quintessential philosophical gesture—the determination to get to the true truth that metaphors ultimately cannot conceal; the meaning, always there, and essentially

unaffected by its transportation from one sign, or analogy, to another. One or another version of that thesis, and its denial, or its reversal, form a “schema” or “philosophical scheme,” and it’s as if they formed a Möbius strip. (§5)

Following Chase, we may link the strip to the paradox, but as the tease indicates, we are really looking at a spatial arrangement of a cyclical temporality. In the de Man essay on Derrida, we have this very same sense of time turned back on itself, as though on the fragile tape of a child’s Möbius strip. As Klein argues correctly, de Man’s essay becomes

the place where the force of Derrida’s text seizes on de Man’s own categories—particularly those of blindness and insight—and whirls them around, puts them through subversions and perversions from which they never recover. De Man thinks he is reading Derrida and correcting him; in fact, it is Derrida who is reading de Man and transforming him. (“Blindness” 39)

Out of all of the accusations leveled at de Man, having too rigorous a “logic” is usually not among the most noteworthy. But it is a logic, one that dips, as Derrida’s does, uncannily into paradox. Their epistemological anomalies speak less to the demands of “style” than to the tensions within symbolic systems. As if waiting for Gödel, Johnson writes in her introduction to Derrida’s *Dissemination*, “an inquiry that attempts to study an object by means of that very object is open to certain analyzable aberrations (this pertains to virtually all important investigations: the self analyzing itself, man studying man, thought thinking thought, language speaking about language, etc.)” (“Translator’s” xvi).

In this section, I have examined how such “analyzable aberrations” impress themselves on totalizing methodologies, resulting in paradoxes of self-referentiality. Adorno’s self-negating claim about dialectical history—that it “lies in the definition of negative dialectics that it will not come to rest in itself, as if it were total”—uncannily parallels a moment in de Man’s reading of Derrida reading literally, whereby de Man performs the exact misreading of which he accuses Derrida, in the process—to borrow a few words from de Man—“misconstru[ing] as blindness what is instead a transposition from the literal to the figural level of discourse” (*Blindness* 139). Such universalizing paradoxes, though, are like houseguests, stagnant in space. It is time to move away from the paradox or, rather, give it its temporal flair.

STRANGE TEMPORALITIES: METALEPSIS

Formalism is thus . . . the basic mode of interpretation of those who refuse interpretation. . . . [T]he Formalist model is essentially synchronic and cannot adequately deal with diachrony, either in literary history or in the form of the individual work.

—Jameson, “Metacommentary” 7–8

It is the nature of *metalepsis* to form a kind of intermediate step between the term transferred and the thing to which it is transferred, having no meaning in itself, but merely providing a transition. . . . We need not waste any more time over it.

—Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria* VIII vi 37

As various poststructuralist critiques have pointed out, formalist approaches map the diachronous onto the synchronous, even those structuralists who try to honor the divergent possibilities of a system in history. I wonder whether the “thus” in the epigraph from Jameson assumes a synchronic or a diachronic form? It presumes a causal reaction, but it takes a logical shape. The relationship(s) between “form” and “history” are not the simplest matters to navigate, especially when one is caught in the waters of an etiological sea. This is especially the case when “form” becomes a backward charge to convict or excuse one of an *outré* politics or nonpolitics.²¹ I explore this relationship between form and history in the contexts of modernism and modernity in the following section as I consider the expansive scope of the “New Modernist Studies,” which bridges the gap between “high” and “low” art. With apologies for my own chronologies, I bridge this high/low cultural gap a little earlier so I might contrast the figural spatializing of temporality and the temporalizing of spatial figures. Thus I turn to the trope of *metalepsis* to examine two aspects of language and two types of *metaleptic* disturbances: the narratological and *metaphysical*.

Metalepsis relates to paradox in its self-referential or recursive sense—what Douglas Hofstadter calls “strange loops.” But as I argue, unlike other tropes, *metalepsis* is temporal in nature, accruing future debts that it must repay to past collectors. I turn to three examples: one from Richard Wagner, one from the *Star Wars* trilogy, and one from Charles Dickens (which I have written about at another time).²² Here is a passage from *The Pickwick Papers*:

As brisk as bees, if not altogether as light as fairies, did the four Pickwickians assemble on the morning of the twenty-second day of December, in the year of grace in which these, their faithfully-recorded adventures, were undertaken and accomplished. Christmas was close at hand, in all his bluff and hearty honesty; it was the season of hospitality, merriment and open heartedness; the old year was preparing, like an ancient philosopher, to call his friends around him, and amidst the sound of feasting and revelry to pass gently and calmly away. Gay and merry was the time; and right gay and merry were at least four of the numerous hearts that were gladdened by its coming.

The scene takes place just before Christmas as Mr. Pickwick and his companions approach their destination:

Gay and merry was the time; and right gay and merry were at least four of the numerous hearts that were gladdened by its coming. . . .

We write these words now, many miles distant from the spot at which, year after year, we met on that day, a merry and joyous circle. Many of the hearts that throbbed so gaily then, have ceased to beat; many of the looks that shone so brightly then, have ceased to glow; the hands we grasped, have grown cold; the eyes we sought, have hid their lustre in the grave; and yet the old house, the room, the merry voices and smiling faces, the jest, the laugh, the most minute and trivial circumstances connected with those happy meetings, crowd upon our mind at each recurrence of the season, as if the last assemblage had been but yesterday! Happy, happy Christmas, that can win us back to the delusions of our childish days; that can recall to the old man the pleasures of his youth; that can transport the sailor and the traveller, thousands of miles away, back to his own fireside and his quiet home!

But we are so taken up, and occupied, with the good qualities of Christmas, who, by the way, is quite a country gentleman of the old school, that we are keeping Mr. Pickwick and his friends waiting in the cold, on the outside of the Muggleton coach, which they have just attained, well wrapped up, in great coats, shawls, and comforters. (*Pickwick*, 334–35)

Only the most discourteous spatial deferral can cause a temporal thirst. As Mr. Pickwick and his cohorts gather beside their coach to begin their pre-Christmas adventure, the narrator becomes so wrapped up describing the spirit of the season that he ends up “keeping Mr. Pickwick and his friends waiting in the cold,” as if they were listening to him tell his tale. What makes this passage so humorous is the manner of narrative overstepping, the conceit that Pickwick and company really had to wait for the narrator to finish, as though they were right there with the reader turning pages, waiting “outside” not just the inn but the narrative itself. In the playful manner of much twentieth-century fiction, Dickens conflates embedded narrative levels, casting his characters into our world and ourselves into theirs.

This passage refigures a formal concern (one within a type of conceptual space) as a temporal matter: The narrative itself is supposedly atemporal in its position. No time ought to pass while the narrator narrates a fixed scene. There is an arrogance here to the narratological self-reference, which insists Pickwick and company wait, while the narrator goes off discursively on a personal quest, as though an analysand on Pickwick’s couch. But time is money, and its sessions are costly. It is not just the shallowness of the narrative at stake here, but meaningfulness itself. Causality is about what *belongs* in a specific frame, not just about what happens to be there by virtue of having been after something else—linguistic accidents and personal whims included. In this sense, in any etiology, it is almost as if a second sight were looking back from a future time, diagnosing the purposiveness of one’s current situation. A meaningful now is a projection of a retrospective future. As we see in the Dickens passage, this meaningful projection is most likely just a function of discursive power—being able to write the scene. More on this later.

But first: The production chronologies of George Lucas’s *Star Wars* films and Richard Wagner’s *Der Ring des Nibelungen* opera cycle are backward writings of a sort. The middle three episodes of the *Star Wars* nonology were filmed and released to theaters about twenty years before the “first” trilogy. The original is later in narrative time but comes earlier, while the sequel is earlier in narrative time but comes later—nothing unusual for prequels. Wagner’s tetralogy has a similarly odd production timeline. Although the four operas were written in chronological order (according to the tale’s linear narrative), the story was planned out in reverse, with the eye of the composer-librettist always looking back in mythological time.²³ Almost all of Wagner’s motifs signal the heavy weight of fate—the prophesying of the Norns as they spin the golden rope, the sleeping

Brünnhilde who will awaken to a hero, the sword Nothung left in a tree to be used generations later, and the curses, oh the curses. The shadow that fate casts over the operas can be seen most notably in act 2 of *Siegfried*, when the Wanderer (the head god, Wotan) and Alberich (the dwarf-king) speak outside Fafnir's (the giant-turned-dragon's) cave. Following Fafnir's weary "*lasst mich Schlafen*" [let me sleep], Wotan warns the dwarf:

Diess Eine, rath'ich,
achte noch wohl:
Alles ist nach seiner Art:
an ihr wirst du nichts ändern.

[One thing I read thee,
think on it well:
all things in their nature act,
nor aught may'st thou alter.] (213)

Agreeably enough, the operas' thematic fatedness mirrors the backward planning of Wagner's external composition, leaving a harmony of existential belief and form. Siegfried will fall victim to the curse of the Rheingold because he must die at the end, his fate having been set both narratively within the fictional world and materially outside it.

At first glance, the metatextual, temporal concern of Wagner seems like that of *Star Wars*, but there is an important difference. If Wagner's operas preach human and divine fatedness, then *Star Wars* sets itself up allegorically as a confrontation between fate and freedom. The whole good of "the Force" is predicated on the guarantee of free will, of choice. The heroic Jedi knights embrace conflict—not the physical sort but rather, like Adorno's "negative dialectic," the theoretical or methodological kind, that which disrupts the existence of a totalizing predetermined order, actualized here as the evil Empire.²⁴ At the end of *Return of the Jedi*, Luke Skywalker confronts the villainous Emperor. An aura of fate surrounds everything the Emperor says: "Welcome, young Skywalker. I have been expecting you. . . . I'm looking forward to completing your training. In time you will call me Master." After Skywalker defeats his evil father, Darth Vader, slicing off his hand in the same manner Vader had done to him, the Emperor says, "Good! Your hate has made you powerful. Now, fulfill your destiny and take your father's place at my side!" The resolute Jedi responds, "Never! I'll never turn to the dark side. You've failed, Your Highness. I am a Jedi, like my

father before me.” Skywalker then turns his dying father good, and the billions of deaths the latter caused are absolved in confession. Hammy yet straightforward. The promise of the Jedi is the promise of an existential freedom, the particulars staving off the universals, the negative dialectic staving off the Empire, the Absolute. The future might be motivated by the past, but it is not bound to it.

The release of the second *Star Wars* trilogy (the one earlier in narrative time) brings about a problem regarding the tale’s fate/freedom binary, which is half narratological and half “material” or what one might call para-filmic.²⁵ The timelines of history and fiction demand that the last episode of the second trilogy (the one earlier chronologically but produced later) match up with the first episode of the earlier trilogy. Accordingly, the narrative is smoothed out with a certain causal prejudice. Here is where things get interesting, because while Wagner’s and Lucas’s narratives are both bound by the “future,” the Lucas films—unlike the Wagner operas—ultimately promise something they cannot deliver (ontologically, not aesthetically speaking). What we have with the *Star Wars* example is a future history (the released films) controlling the possibilities of the present, a para-textual requirement that goes explicitly against the heroic Jedi doctrine of freedom, conflict, and choice at the center of the story. Literally, the films tell us that choice exists, while para-textually we discover that such freedom was an illusion all along. Because of the temporality of its actual production, the form of the film defeats its message: There can be no freedom, because the “future” determines the “past.”²⁶

My purpose in bringing together the witty Dickens passage and the para-filmic dissonance of *Star Wars* is not to critique the predictability or ideology of some humanistic ventures but to suggest that these problems are really two sides of the same narratological coin. *The Pickwick Papers*—which is supposedly atemporal in its position (the joke is that no time really passes while the narrator narrates a fixed scene)—refigures a spatial or formal matter temporally. *Star Wars*, on the other hand, refigures the temporal—specifically the tension between real production time and fictional narrative time—in a spatial or formal way. Here in this cloud of narratological smoke, emanating perhaps from the destruction of the Death Star, form and its historical or material mediation come together. And where there is smoke . . . there is metalepsis.

Most of the medieval treatises on rhetoric follow Quintilian’s understanding of metalepsis as a double figural substitution, “linked with synonymy (involving incongruous use of a synonym) as well as metonymy

(involving a temporal transfer that expresses the precedent by the consequent or vice versa)” (Prince 625). In a dictate on one of Virgil’s odd uses of a word, Quintilian says,

It is the nature of *metalepsis* to form a kind of intermediate step between the term transferred and the thing to which it is transferred, having no meaning in itself, but merely providing a transition. It is a *trope* with which to claim acquaintance, rather than one which we are ever likely to require to use. The commonest example is the following: *cano* is a synonym for *canto* and *canto* for *dico*, therefore *cano* is a synonym for *dico*, the intermediate step being provided by *canto*. We need not waste any more time over it.²⁷ (37)

Quintilian’s example of a double figural substitution is not the best. A better one would be the idiom “having a lead foot,” which means that one’s foot is heavy like lead, and thus, when one drives, gravity will force the foot to the floor, thereby pushing the accelerator and speeding the car. Where Quintilian latches onto the simple transitive property of the figure, other glosses focus on the unstated middle term of the double figural substitution, the not-said, which is a diachronic element: “gravity will force the driver’s foot to the floor” in my example. The strange temporality of *metalepsis* has followed it into other rhetorical contexts. Today, the trope has different but interrelated meanings. Whether it is taken to mean a narrative transgression (as in the Dickens passage), a “kind of intermediate step” of linguistic development (like *catachresis* as Quintilian saw it), a metonymical substitution for an already figurative term, or “some disconnected pre-text,” *metalepsis* always engages with what George Puttenham called “the farrefet,” or the farfetched, “as when we had rather fetch a word a great way off” (152).²⁸ Puttenham’s farrefet is peculiarly gendered, purely ornamental, and acts as a type of pick-up line: “And it feemeth the deuifer of this figure, had a defire to please women rather than men, for we use to say by manner of Prouerbe: things farrefet and deare bought are good for Ladies: fo in this manner of speach we use it, leaping ouer the heads of a many great words” (152). Although it might not please women more than men, the passage from *The Pickwick Papers* presents something unseemly. In bringing together different conceptual spaces of the socialized narrative (this sort of thing is not done in public or in Realism!), it “transgress[es] the boundaries between the world *in* which one

tells and the world *of* which one tells” (Hollander and Fletcher 760). Gérard Genette calls this transgressive storytelling act narratological metalepsis. “The transition from one narrative level to another,” he writes, “consists precisely of introducing into one situation, by means of a discourse, the knowledge of another situation” (234). In Genette’s narratological sense, metalepsis describes when readers or extradiegetic narrators (those who are outside the narrative frame) are brought into a diegetic world (the fictional universe of the story). It also describes the reverse: when diegetic characters enter an extradiegetic space and no longer see themselves as “people” but as fictional characters. This narratological version of metalepsis, popularly called the more general “metafiction,” has undergone intense scrutiny in the halls of narratology.²⁹

It is not this sense of metalepsis, however, that most concerns me, but the sense evinced by the *Star Wars* example. As I discussed in the preface, this other, more metaphysical sense of metalepsis comes (with apologies for a brief recurrence) from Friedrich Nietzsche’s reworking of the presumptions of causality. For Nietzsche, there can be a fire, only because we know there will have been smoke. He writes,

That which gives us such an extraordinary firm faith in causality, is not the rough habit of observing the sequence of processes; but our *inability to interpret* a phenomenon otherwise than as the result of *design*. It is the *belief* in living and thinking things, as the only agents of *causation*; it is the belief in will, in design—the belief that all phenomena are actions, and that all actions presuppose an agent; it is the belief in the “subject.”³⁰ (*Will* §550, 55)

What Nietzsche would challenge as a confusion between “sequence” and “design” is central to how we make meaning of the world around us. According to Mutlu Blasing, “Metalepsis is an intentionalizing trope that ‘motivates’ time and, in the broadest sense, history itself. A ‘meaningful’ history is a typological history, where historical lateness is motivated as an earliness, as the fulfillment of a precursor, the antitype of type” (*Lyrical* 32). A meaningful history includes, for some, religiously preordained events—Moses will wander in the woods until Christ gives him meaning—but it also includes any teleological or universalizing narrative, be it Marxist, psychological, ontological, political, philosophical, and even (to add a paradox to the rhetorical fire) figural. Scientists will project as yet undiscovered laws back across time for all history, motivating the then-world’s physical nature