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TONALITIES OF LITERATURE  
IN POST-DICTATORSHIP ARGENTINA

*Mood and History in Post-Utopian Times*

In a well-known formulation, Fredric Jameson defines postmodernity as an epochal shift coinciding with the tendential colonization of the planet by transnational capital.<sup>1</sup> The postmodern is what obtains when even those regions previously considered beyond the reach of commodification—nature and the unconscious—are now found to have been assimilated into the equivalential logic of exchange. By the same token, the old nature/culture dichotomy must be reexamined today to account for what Jameson describes as the “dilation of [the cultural] sphere, an immense and historically original acculturation of the Real” (Jameson 1991, x). Whereas nature used to embody the idea of a pure origin or pure difference in contrast to human artifice—an origin of which culture was the copy or emulation—that old opposition has now been destabilized through the deterritorializing drive of capital. Capitalism’s absorption of its putative outside through acculturation constitutes the late modern cultural analogue of what Marx characterized as the formal subsumption of traditional social forms and practices into capitalist production.

Jameson’s use of “acculturation” to thematize the displacement of manufacture by culture as the driving logic of capitalist production and accumulation covers a wide range of social phenomena. For the purposes of this chapter, salient examples can be found in the privatization

of public spaces, industries, and resources under neoliberalism, and in the capitalization of endangered natural environments in the entertainment industry together with adaptation of commodity production to the environmental movement (theme parks, ecotourism, Fair Trade). Similarly, localities are encouraged to cultivate unique geographical and cultural "identities" to attract flows of transnational capital. By the same token, political discourse in the age of mass media is obliged to adapt to the technical capabilities and temporality of media coverage (telegenic demeanor, ability to generate and manage sound bites, news cycles, etc.). The growth of cable TV and the Internet fosters the emergence of niche markets that enable consumers to choose their source of information about the world based on ideological compatibility. Whereas the media's historical role in modern societies was to present the truth irrespective of its compatibility with power, that mandate is now subjugated to marketing concerns in a context where consumers are predisposed to prefer information sources that will confirm pre-existing belief structures. In all of these examples, the line between civic and political life and the entertainment industry has become more blurry than ever.

For Jameson, one of the defining features of postmodernity is that time, a primary source of modern preoccupations and desires, is supplanted by space. Our world today is shaped by a prevailing deafness to history and by the waning of affects and intensities, most notably the aspirations associated with utopian social and political projects. We have lost our capacity to experience the present as part of a historical process whose direction remains to be determined; we no longer see the world we live in as a contingent configuration of structures, relations, and meanings that could at some point be susceptible to transformation. Like ideology for Althusser, Jamesonian globalization is a process without subject, which is to say that we experience it as something that "just happens," and which is therefore pointless to oppose. By the same token, we no longer look to the future for the outline of a possible world whose reality we could have a hand in bringing into existence; the utopian imaginary has been consigned to the dustbin of history along with planned economies. In the absence of any substantive challenge to the primacy of the market it is difficult to envision the future as anything other than a timeless expanse in which the present extends itself *ad infinitum*.

The thought of newness, together with the aspirations and the uneasiness it evokes, was a formative component of nineteenth and twentieth-century modernity from Baudelaire through the 1960s. Postmodernism in turn is synonymous with the sense that, for better or for worse, we have arrived at the end of history and its ideologically driven cycles of destruction and renewal. Newness may not have disappeared entirely from the world, but the capacity to experience or imagine it has been subsumed within the logical circuitry of commodity production and consumer demand, for which novelty is as important as utility if not more so. Consumer desire is the desire of the new. Within this reconfiguration of historical temporality as the time of commodity upgrading, newness acts as a simulacrum that promises contemporaneity while also shielding us from the fact that within the timeframe of Jamesonian postmodernity there can be nothing truly new under the sun.

These transformations pose substantial difficulties for critical thought, especially if we still hold to the view that one of thinking's tasks is to grapple with the contingency of the present and of the prevailing logic of social organization. One of the consequences of the ascendancy of transnational capital and neoliberal privatization is that resistance to capital becomes difficult to imagine. The problem is not just that the old forms of opposing the unchecked expansion of capitalism—Marxian-inspired revolution, national populism, or even the modern State—have been rendered obsolete or integrated into capitalism. In its relentless expansion, global capital has succeeded in divesting itself of any identifiable point of origin. Its expansive drive can no longer be attributed to the geopolitics of imperialism or the cultural dissemination of the American way of life, as was the case in Latin America from the time of Sarmiento through the 1970s. Its impulses are now everywhere and thus it emanates from nowhere in particular. In sync with the exhaustive defeat of all political alternatives to free-market capitalism, neoliberalism works to ensure that any conceivable alternative to the market could only come into view at the expense of its own legibility: as anachronism, naïveté or just plain madness.

In Argentina, the impact of this epochal reinscription is intensified by the ways in which histories of radical contestatory movements and political violence of the 1960s and '70s are erased or rewritten in the aftermath of the brutal military dictatorships of the 1970s and '80s.

One of the emergent narratives during the transition to democracy is the "theory of the two devils" [*teoría de los dos demonios*]. According to that account, a military takeover was the logical consequence of the misguided calculations of political radicalism of the 1970s. The repressive tactics employed by the junta were excessive and immoral, to be sure, but they were nonetheless a predictable response to the strategic miscalculations of the Argentine Left. While the extreme Left and far Right were engaged in fratricidal conflict in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the majority of Argentines were innocent civilians who found themselves caught in the crossfire and forced to pay for the poor judgment and crimes committed by the two extremes. This narrative, prevalent in the discourse of the democratically elected government of Raúl Alfonsín (1983–89) as well as the influential 1984 *¡Nunca Más!* Human Rights report produced by National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons (CONADEP), enacts a series of powerful erasures and rewritings. First, it supports a problematic moral and tactical equivalence between the armed guerilla movements, the far-right counterinsurgency, and the military state, together with their respective forms of violence.<sup>2</sup> Second, in focusing on political violence and disorder as the sufficient cause that explains dictatorship, this narrative renders illegible the question of what interests might have supported and benefited from the systematic illegal repression—much of which was directed against the Argentine labor movement during the mid-1970s—together with the deregulation of the Argentine banking system under Minister of Economy José Martínez de Hoz following the 1976 military takeover. This effacement of the question of economic interest and of who benefited from the "national reorganization" undertaken under military rule becomes even more complicated in the decades following the transition, when it becomes possible to ask how the social transformation of 1976–1983 ("el Proceso de Reorganización Nacional") might have contributed to paving the way for the full implementation of neoliberal reform under the presidency of Carlos Menem (1989–1999). The third erasure at work in the "dos demonios" narrative resides in the ideology of innocence and neutrality, through which many in Argentina sought to rationalize and justify their inaction in the face of state terrorism—based on fear, indifference, or outright complicity with the repressors—which is retroactively sanctioned as a moral virtue. The theory of the two devils is the late modern cognate of the fable of "primitive accumulation" through which, according to

Marx, political economy produced an idealized account of the origins of modern capitalism. The ultimate moral of the interpretive fable of the warring devils is that any attempt to alter the fundamental coordinates of the capitalist system will inevitably provoke state repression in its primal, indiscriminate fury.<sup>3</sup>

Early experimentation with neoliberal economic theory in Chile and Argentina during 1970s was fully interconnected with the routinization of state of emergency decrees whose ostensible purpose was to put an end to disorder stemming from political violence. The complex and interrelated histories of political conflict and socioeconomic transformation poses significant problems for sociologically informed understandings of “transition.”<sup>4</sup> During the 1980s and 1990s democracy became synonymous with its neoliberal articulation as a transparent electoral process coupled with privatization and unfettered economic opportunity in the private sector. In many cases the democracy-market equivalency was bolstered by the specter of the return of the military should the prevailing order find itself threatened—either by contestatory politics or economic crisis. The myriad of potentially conflicting senses of “freedom” within the democratic tradition was effectively reduced to a strict homology between democracy and economic opportunity for capitalists under the hegemony of consensus.

But does the new configuration of sensibility under the cultural logic of late capitalism and neoliberal-administered globalization truly differ from other moments in the history of ideological struggle for hegemony? Don't *all* ideologies and hegemonic procedures involve some *particular* (a leader, an idea, or a name) that is effectively able to minimize its contingency and particularity in order to pass itself off as the truth of the social, as a universal with which all parts can identify and in which each discovers its own freedom?<sup>5</sup> Perhaps a key distinction between the cultural logic of late capitalism and the ideological formations proper to other historical contexts can be found in the specificity of erasures enacted in the time of post-dictatorship. The retreat of ideological antagonism under heavy stigmatization, together with the widely proclaimed end of history, coincides with the emergence of “Consensus” as the unassailable telos of all politics.<sup>6</sup> Whatever parallels it may evoke with the history of hegemony politics, “Consensus” is not just another name for the universal status claimed by all hegemons. For the ideology of consensus, the conception of politics as an open field of engagement and contention in which the shared lexicon of the

community is open to contestation, is closed off and replaced by an administrative rationale in which conflict and disagreement—the very possibility of democratic politics—are recoded as existential threats to the social order. The possibility of politics as such recedes behind the specters of anarchy and war. Consensus is the ideologeme of the end of ideology.

The double inscription that binds democracy with the free market serves as a powerful tool for ideological legitimation today. In Jameson's analysis, the modern principle of separation of spheres is eclipsed as culture expands beyond its own particularity to assert itself as the paradigmatic modality of commodity production as well as the driving force behind the incorporation of formerly residual zones into the capitalist global system. To the extent that consensus functions as the new hegemon of neoliberal post-dictatorship, the sociological concept of transition becomes fraught with an inconsistency that cannot easily be remedied. In principle, transition ought to be synonymous with going across or over (*trans-*, *transitio*), with a passage from one order or era to another. But the terms under which Southern Cone transitions to democracy took place were carefully calculated to block any further possibility for transformation.

In Argentina, most of the 1976–1983 junta leaders were tried and convicted during the historic 1985 trials organized by the newly elected president Raúl Alfonsín. In the wake of that legal watershed moment, however, the Alfonsín administration was weakened by ongoing battles with inflation, recession, and monetary depreciation. In response to growing resentment and pressure from the military, including several barrack mutinies led by lower-ranking military officers, Alfonsín authored two laws intended to curtail future legal prosecutions: the 1986 *Ley de Punto Final* (Full Stop Law), which imposed a time limit on further legal proceedings; and the 1987 *Ley de Obediencia Debida* (Law of Due Obedience), which assured that subordinates in the military ranks would not be tried for crimes for which they could reasonably claim to have been "following orders."<sup>7</sup> In May 1989, six months prior to the end of his term, record levels of inflation and currency depreciation led Alfonsín to transfer power to his successor, Carlos Menem.

In pointing out how political weakness in the transitional regime curtailed the pursuit of legal redress for wrongs suffered under dictatorship, I do not wish to diminish the symbolic importance of the trials or

ignore the fact that this moment would later provide the pretext for a new round of legal prosecutions under the Kirchner administration in the early 2000s. But for the purposes of this chapter it is important to note that for many Argentines during the mid- to late 1980s the symbolic importance of the trials had likely been overshadowed by pragmatic concessions to a still strong and politically independent military. It would be fair to say that, in view of the patent institutional weakness of its new democratic government, the prevailing mood in Argentina was deeply pessimistic concerning the ability of any democratic regime to guarantee order, not to mention justice.<sup>8</sup> Transition in Argentina coincides with the inscription of new principle that establishes free-market capitalism as the *sine qua non* for democracy and freedom while imposing ideological barriers against any serious reflection on the processes through which “Consensus” imposed itself in the first place. The transition thus paradoxically coincides with and reinforces the impossibility of any further *trans-*.

This chapter examines matters related to postmodernity, history, mood, and thought through a reading of the Argentine novelist Marcelo Cohen’s *El oído absoluto* (1989).<sup>9</sup> Two general lines of questioning inform my reading of the text. The first is an exploration of what Jameson’s theorization of “the cultural logic” of late capitalism has in common with Cohen’s literary reflections on Latin American post-dictatorship societies. Jameson notes that his analyses and conclusions are relevant for a specific cultural context, that of late-twentieth-century North America, and that his findings are not necessarily generalizable. If “culture” could be shown to display a similarly universalizing tendency in the Southern Cone beginning in the 1980s and ’90s, would Jameson’s conceptual and analytical vocabulary offer a productive toolbox for reading post-dictatorship Southern Cone novels?

The controversial position famously staked out by Jameson just a few years before the publication of Cohen’s novel, of Latin American literature (or “third world literature” in general) as governed by the paradigm of national allegory (Jameson 1986), arguably runs up against its expiration date during the time of neoliberal consensus, when national-popular sovereignty relinquishes its potency as political signifier and organizational principle for the social. Jameson’s claims about national allegory depend on the assertion of a fundamental distinction between “first” and “third” world contexts: whereas in the developed world the public (politics) is now privatized (recoded as stories about inner life,

psychology, etc.), in the periphery the private and the political have not yet been decisively separated. The third world novel thus presents in overt, legible form what can only appear in coded form in the first world; the third world lays bare the unconscious of the first world. By way of contrast, the time of Consensus would mark the definitive effacement of the first/third distinction that sustains Jameson's concept of national allegory.

All of this, however, should not lead us to conclude too hastily that the paradigm of national allegory can simply be relegated to the dustbin of history. On my reading, Cohen's novel offers a new approach to allegory, one that could provide the basis for an interesting response to the way in which Jameson's essay has been read—and frequently dismissed—by his critics, to wit, allegory as extended metaphor or as construction of a framework of signification in which personal circumstances reflect national (colonial or postcolonial) realities. Those schemata arguably have some explanatory power for earlier moments in Latin American literary history, but they are incapable of playing anything more than a residual role in post-dictatorship literature. If the concept of national allegory has anything at all to say to *El oído absoluto* it would require us to listen for another sense in the term *allegory*, a sense first theorized by Walter Benjamin in the context of baroque literary responses to secularization. Allegory in that early modern context provides a name for a certain excess in literary language; it names a tendency for signification to miss its presumptive target, attesting thereby to the way in which classical forms of transcendence have been destabilized. The dystopian theme at work in Cohen's novel provides a critical reassessment of late capitalist modernization in all of its deafening banality, but it also enacts a return to and rewriting of an earlier utopian history of Latin American modernization. In between these two contexts, *El oído absoluto* anticipates the impending epochal foreclosure of modernity together with the inability of a new order to take its place. In other words, it presents itself as an early diagnosis of interregnum in the post-dictatorship Southern Cone.

The other line of questioning that I alluded to above looks at philosophical considerations of the interrelatedness of history, thought, mood, and world. I begin with a short discussion of Heidegger's reflections on mood, historicity, world, and facticity in *Being and Time* (1927) and later works, which together generate an evolving account of the reciprocal determination of being, thinking, and feeling. The mutual



implicatedness of world and thinking in Heidegger is activated by the rise of particular moods or attunements. I am interested in how a shift in Heidegger's thinking about mood, from the ahistorical *Stimmung* of *Being and Time* to the historicized *Bestimmungen* of later writings, could help to move critical debate about late modernity or postmodernity beyond the commonplace image of the postmodern as a time characterized either by uncritical jubilation, boundless despair, or by the waning of all affect and mood altogether.

#### PHILOSOPHICAL CRITIQUE AND THE DARKENING OF THE WORLD: THINKING, MOOD, AND ATTUNEMENT

Ever since Archimedes, Western thought has held to the view that substantive transformation of the world must begin by postulating an external point from which the world could be grasped as totality. The possibility of thinking the world as totality presupposes thought's capacity to posit for itself a locus external to the whole it seeks to grasp. This transcendent point has received various names in the history of Western thought: the One for the pre-Socratics, Nature in the Latin tradition, God in the Judeo-Christian tradition, the humanistic idea of Man, Enlightenment notions of progress and emancipation as well as the People and Revolution. To accept Jameson's account of postmodernism as the subsumption of nature and the unconscious within commodity logic is to acknowledge the withdrawal of any possible outside from which the world could be grasped as a whole and/or transformed.

Martin Heidegger would seem to have anticipated this problem when he describes thought and action as always already situated within a prior, constitutively irretrievable understanding of *being*. There can be no thought and no action that is not already framed by a network of significant relations, a framework of reference with and against which thought and action move. All thinking and action take place within a prior determination of how truth is disclosed and what is to be understood when we say that something *is*. As thinking and speaking beings we are "born" into a specific predetermination of "being," of what truth in its disclosure must look like. This preontological structure is by no means simply imposed on us. Precomprehension only happens insofar as there is thought and action; it would make no sense, in Heidegger's terms, to speak of animals as possessing precomprehension.

While precomprehension must be posited as the a priori of thought and action, it takes effect only when we think and act in the world. To complicate things further, this a priori structure is itself inaccessible to knowledge; if we can ever catch a glimpse of what conditions thought and action, it can only be through what *Being and Time* calls mood (*Stimmung*). *Stimmung* is not just the specific emotional state of an individual. We come closer to capturing its sense when we speak of what is "in the air" at a given moment or when we distinguish between the respective generational "moods" of, say, the Roaring Twenties, the Great Depression, and the 1980s in the United States. In *Being and Time*, however, *Stimmung* is not analyzed as something that could shift from one moment to the next but instead names the factual tonality of human experience in general insofar as it is characterized by the temporality of "care" (*Sorge*). The connection between precomprehension of being and mood is illustrated in Heidegger's seminar on Hölderlin's *Germanium* held in Winter 1934–35:

A world never allows itself to be opened and then stuck back together beginning from a multitude of perceived objects reassembled after the fact; rather it is that which in advance is most originally and inherently manifest, within which alone such and such a thing may come to meet us. The world's opening movement comes about in the fundamental mood [*Grundstimmung*]. The power to transport, integrate, and thus open, that a fundamental mood possesses is therefore a power to found, for it places *Dasein* upon its foundations facing its abysses. (Heidegger 1976, 140–41; as quoted in Haar 1992, 163)

Thinking cannot separate itself from the archaic precomprehension of *being* without which no understanding of *beings* would be possible. In concrete terms, there can be no understanding between *Dasein* and world, and no mutual understanding among interlocutors and no grasping of beings as beings, unless there is already axiomatic agreement on the status of certain fundamental terms such as the word *is*. That "we always already move about in an understanding of being" means that thinking, in asking about the being or essence of beings and things, can find no approach to its object that is not already compromised by a certain tilt of thought (Heidegger 1962, 25). By the same token, this a priori structure would seem to be irretrievable to

analysis insofar as it conditions every attempt to ask questions about the nature of things. Thinking automatically reproduces the specific form of precomprehension from which it arises whenever and wherever it operates. Precomprehension is thus the shadowy un-thought that silently accompanies and shapes thought and its representations at every turn, not unlike the way in which primary repression informs both unconscious and conscious processes in Freud.

Thinking can thus never hope to strip away the predetermination of being from which it emerges in order to gain access to the world "as it truly is." What could better illustrate this point than the fact that the *as such* ("as it truly is") is itself the product of a certain precomprehension, one that understands truth according to a self-evident distinction between (deceptive) appearances and truth or essence. Thought presupposes and reproduces the precomprehension from which it arises. But this circularity need not lure us to the solipsistic conclusion that thought must give up on the question of truth or that thinking is restricted to reconfirming what it already knows. Whenever and wherever deliberation happens, thinking has already been exposed to what *Being and Time* terms the facticity of existence. Facticity, synonymous with "thrownness" (*Geworfenheit*), refers to existential finitude that both conditions Dasein's being in the world as a being-with-others while also limiting Dasein's capacity to master its own existence as subject.

While Heidegger insists that thinking has no access to the primordial determinations that silently shape the configuration of our experience of the world, *Stimmung* (mood, ambiance, climate, sentiment) names an experiential register in which we can gain a liminal awareness of the world in its facticity.<sup>10</sup> Certain emotions can prompt us to pause and step back from our routinized, calculating ways of relating to the world. A privileged example in *Being and Time* occurs in the analysis of anxiety, a negative affect characteristically disassociated from any determinate object. Whereas fear and hatred are always fear and hatred of something specific, anxiety has no proper object; or rather, says Heidegger, its "object" is precisely the nothing, the void around which the world as a network of significant relations is structured. With the onset of anxiety our everyday concerns and responsibilities, whose imperatives we ordinarily obey without question, are suddenly interrupted. With the onset of anxiety we lose our footing in the world and become acutely aware of the fragile contingency lurking beneath everything

that we ordinarily accept as possessing the solidity of what is permanent and necessary. Michel Haar's account of how anxiety prepares an experience of facticity is illuminating:

Mood does not think the totality, but rather *makes it come about*, emerge more originally than representation, which proceeding by construction or assemblage, can only think after the fact. Mood makes thought possible as an event of being. When anxiety results in the negation of beings as a whole, the negation is not a thought in the sense of a representation, but rather an experience. Mood initiates into the very principle of thought as the experience of being, an experience which is that of a dispossession or a decentering of Dasein. By itself, thought is incapable of producing essential negation, that is, the principle of all negation, the Nothing. (Haar 153; emphasis added)

Anxiety as Heidegger understands it is not the subjective experience envisioned by existentialism. The extreme negativity of factual dispossession displaces the philosophical conception of subject that has been understood since Descartes as the source or origin of its own representations. As "essential negation," anxiety both bears witness to the negation of the domain of things and their demands and clears the way for an experience of the nothing, the structuring void that marks the absence of an *arkhē* or ground for being. As Haar clarifies in the passage just cited, mood differs from thinking in that it discloses as experience whereas thought traffics in the coin of representation. Mood does not think (represent) the world as totality but instead "makes it come about" as a totality of significant relations that in turn provides the framework within which thought and representation take place. Mood makes this totality come about insofar as it brings us to the verge of its collapse qua totality of meaning. Disclosure for Heidegger is not synonymous with production, which presupposes a producer or subject. The experience of anxiety registers the "factual totality" of being, or the way in which being is *given* before thinking can assume a position of mastery (judgment, understanding) over it. *Stimmung*, Haar adds, "leads back to an already-there, to a past which was never present" (Haar 1993, 14). Whereas the philosophical tradition from the Presocratics onward has tended to equate such radical anteriority with nature, one of the important contributions of Heidegger's analysis

of *Stimmung* is found in his assertion that the “step back” imposed by anxiety constitutes a potential point of departure for thinking, an opportunity for thought to project itself beyond the time and place in which it finds itself and toward the limits of the established coordinates that shape what can be said and thought at a given juncture in the history of being. With the onset of anxiety, the imperatives, truth claims, and rhythm imposed by the structures of everyday life show signs of wavering. In bracketing off accustomed ways of looking at and ordering our world, anxiety imposes a step back away from our familiarized forms of interacting with the world. It clears the way for an experience of the world as enigma, as something anterior and irreducible to the sum of beings and objects apprehended by calculative, techno-scientific reason.

The suspension of everyday concerns and common sense that is prompted in anxiety may provide a first step in opening up a new path for thought. In order to see why, we must bear in mind that for Heidegger being is not a transcendental substrata for beings, nor is it synonymous with the permanence of presence in any form. In Heidegger’s thought, being names a *finite* conditioning of what is present; it names an always specific and contingent opening or mode of disclosure through which our world—along with the things and beings in it—becomes present and sensible. Being *is not* prior to the event of disclosure through which a given epoch or people come to experience the world in a distinctive manner. What we could call, for lack of a better term, the “passive” sense of mood—mood as mark of the irretrievable anteriority of being—is thus already inscribed by a kind of “activity” or *re-mark*: mood as participating in bringing forth a unique way of allowing beings to disclose themselves. Mood names the double *affection* through which being takes hold of thought and action while also remaining in need of human hands and voice in order to come into existence. Being and the historicity of thought, the historicity of modes of revealing, turn out to be inseparable. The effect or the mark participates in bringing about its own cause as projected, finite being.

Being is never quite where or what we think it is, precisely because it “is” the secret origin of thinking itself, the silent call to which thinking will have been a response.<sup>11</sup> The experience of anteriority that comes to us through anxiety brings about a double awareness: that for thought there is no way into being as such, but neither is there any way out. Thinking cannot grasp what is both prior to and constitutive

of its representations. It cannot think its own origin in the world, the call to which it is itself a response. But thinking is likewise unable to disown its debts and separate itself from the specific ways in which it is enjoined to wonder and ask questions about things. We are always already within being even when we have turned away from it or forgotten it. This double awareness, which is also a double constraint, does not resolve the problem identified earlier concerning the inaccessibility of an Archimedean point for thought and action today. If anything, it intensifies the problem by indicating that it is not simply the product of a particular historical moment.

Following the publication of *Being and Time* and beginning in the 1930s, Heidegger turns his focus from anxiety to various specific moods that he regards as belonging to a given epoch in the history of being. While the structure of what he calls *Bestimmung* (attunement) is very similar to that of *Stimmung* or mood, and while the law of precomprehension of being remains in effect, the turn to *Bestimmung* facilitates a more far-reaching exploration of the historicity of the relation between thought and being—not according to the discipline of historiography but in relation to what Heidegger had come to view as the historical nature of being. All thought as such has been attuned (*bestimmt*) to its world in a specific way, prepared or tuned in by the “voice” (*Stimme*) of being itself. Certain dispositions or moods seem to belong characteristically to a given time and place and its specific way of experiencing being. Thus, the quasi-ahistorical *Stimmung* of which Heidegger speaks in the 1920s becomes *Bestimmung*, the historical determination of an epochal tone, climate, or appointment.<sup>12</sup> For instance, speechless astonishment before the sheer fact of being was a fundamental characteristic of Greek thinking. Hyperbolic doubt—and its calculated conversion into certainty—in turn set the prevailing tone for the modern rationalist tradition beginning with Descartes. Meanwhile, the link between wonder and questioning has all but disappeared from our modern, disenchanted world. As the epoch of metaphysics comes to a close with Hegel, Nietzsche, and the rise of modern techno-scientific reason, terror attests to a new sense of unease arising with the retreat of old authoritative points of reference (God, the Monarch, even the humanist concept of Man). Alongside terror Heidegger also identifies a strange disposition that he calls the distress of the absence of distress: a flat, almost toneless mood corresponding to our turn away from the vacated site of transcendence and toward the nihilistic certainty that

the human subject is the source of all truth in the world. As Haar puts it, “[T]he true distress of thought is not a localized, ephemeral aporia, but the collapse of established signposts, indetermination taking hold of being in its entirety” (1992, 153).

The shift from *Stimmung* to *Bestimmung* helps set the stage for a clarification in Heidegger’s thinking regarding the historicity of being. This shift can be located in the *Beiträge Zur Philosophie* (1936–38; translated into English as *Enowning: Contributions to Philosophy* [Heidegger 1999]) and is also evident in many of the collected essays published under the title *The Question Concerning Technology* (Heidegger 1977). As we have already seen, mood, thinking, world-disclosure, and the historicity of being are profoundly interrelated themes in Heidegger’s thought. Mood brings us to experience a debt that representational thinking can never grasp sufficiently: the silent, radical anteriority of Dasein’s exposure to a world. Attunement, meanwhile, names the way in which perception and thought are configured by a given epoch and by the prevailing modes of disclosure that characterize it; at the same time, attunement also participates in constituting a given epoch and its modality of thinking and acting. The Greek experience of being is not only reflected in speechless astonishment; it *is* this wonder that prepares a specific way of asking questions about the world. Mood as hearing, as responding to the voice of being, is also attunement as first orientation toward being.

The tenor of thinking’s attunement is wont to fluctuate, not only from one epoch to another but within any given epoch itself. For example, in the modern epoch that is inaugurated with the Cartesian cogito, the introduction of radical skepticism is calculated to culminate dialectically in the certitude of techno-scientific truth. But the self-assuredness of scientific certainty does not define the modern era in univocal fashion. The self-confidence secured by rational scientific certainty is obliged to compete with the uncertainties that stem from the retreat of old authoritative reference points. Self-certainty is confronted by an emergent feeling of terror that reflects a dawning awareness of crisis or failure within the project of modernity, a sense of unease that modernity with all its resources has proven incapable of dispelling.

A new danger shows itself in the ruins of metaphysical system-thinking, where technics finds itself virtually alone in the world today. We no longer have recourse to “God,” “Reason,” “Man,” or any other transcendental point of reference that could check the advance of

technology or mediate instrumentalist representations of the world that Heidegger calls *Gestell* ("enframing"). *Gestell* discloses our world today as the order of "standing reserve," or a totality of objects available for consumption. The unchecked supremacy of technological ordering introduces a new species of intonation into the world today: a vague, nearly accent-less mood for which Heidegger reserves the paradoxical phrase "distress of lack of distress" (Heidegger 1999, 75). Self-assured and unquestioning, this flattened-out tone attests to a world that has already been mapped and calculated in its entirety. This borderline tone is unable to open any new experience of the world as a step back from self-evident everydayness—as enigma, wonder, mystery, surprise. Because it has already disavowed the void, it also has no capacity to disrupt the self-evident necessity of what goes without saying. This distress-of-no-distress is always already mutating into its opposite: self-assured effervescence as the complete absence of distress. Analogous to what Jameson describes as the "exhilaration" that accompanies the cultural subsumption of the real, the "distress of lack of distress" is one mood among others, and at the same time it anticipates the anaesthetization of mood as such.

What could provide a better description of the affective climate of neoliberalism than the tangled web of terror and distress-of-no-distress found in Heidegger? As Wendy Brown argues in a recent interview, critical understanding of neoliberalism should be wary of the standard association of postmodernism with critical and leftist despair and cynicism. The entrenchment of neoliberal consensus cannot be explained by the idea that, with the retreat of traditional contestatory political imaginaries, utopianism has been replaced by despondency. The pathos of despair is still too modern in its tonality. In its place, Brown proposes that neoliberalism should be understood in terms of a softer and more insidious underlying "quotidian nihilism" (Brown 2010, np). Quotidian nihilism takes root in a general sense of directionlessness and pointlessness that prevail in a world that has been thoroughly disenchanting and purged of any idealizable future. Neoliberalism in turn, argues Brown, wants to be understood as a kind of response to quotidian nihilism. Positioning itself *against* this radically de-idealized image of the world, neoliberalism offers a minimally compensatory message of practical and moral authority by telling us what to do, think, and feel. According to neoliberalism, we must now finally come around to the pragmatic position of seeing ourselves as specimens of human capital who need



to “appreciate [and actualize our] own value by making proper choices and investing in proper things” (Brown np). The advantage of Brown’s account over standard views of postmodernity as a simple emptying out of all affective capacity is that hers retains an ability to account for the proliferation of neoliberal consensus in terms of the minimal friction it is able to sustain in relation to globalized capital. Even as it presides over the entombment of modern utopian imaginaries, neoliberalism continues to draw interest on resistance to deterritorialization.

In this light, it would seem worthwhile to look more closely at how tonality contributes to Heidegger’s meditations on the historicity of thinking. For one thing, tone is easily misconstrued as the antithesis of content or meaning, as in the commonplace distinction between *what* one says and *how* one says it. According to that view, tone would be mere window dressing for the true concerns of thought, which reside in the domain of ideas. But as we know from experience, *how* a matter is voiced can be just as significant as the meaning of the words, if not more so. Tone is frequently the conduit through which circulates what has not been said, and tenor frequently indicates what is really at stake in a given statement or question. Heidegger’s emphasis on tone marks a departure from the hermeneutic tradition for which words are like vessels containing meanings that await interpretation. Tone certainly calls for interpretation too, but not because its significance lies hidden beneath the surface. If thinking owes a debt to tone that it cannot easily repay—because mood is prior to all accounting and all representation—is this not because its sense is to be found in the air rather than in the surface/depth dichotomy to which the hermeneutic tradition is bound?

Attunement for Heidegger designates an opening or receptivity to the anteriority of a call: the call of being in which being is immanent to the call itself. Whereas idealist traditions understand consciousness as self-affective, attunement provides a way to think thought (and action) as deriving from a site that precedes the distinction between self-conscious subject and object. By the same token, whereas philosophy often categorizes thought as an abstract, spiritual domain, consideration of attunement supports attention to material and corporeal registers—the throat, larynx, and ear—that as corporeal supplements are irreducible to the abstractions of thought. No doubt the focus on voice and hearing also reflects Heidegger’s efforts to distance himself from the traditional privilege accorded to the visual in the philosophical tradition, a

privilege evident both in the etymological roots of the term *theory* and in the colloquial association of knowledge with sight.<sup>13</sup>

The turn from *what* to *how*, from content to tone, risks reintroducing erroneous assumptions about the conceptual stability of mood and tone. Tone and mood are not homogeneous entities (*a* tone or mood: astonishment, anxiety, etc.). On the contrary, tone as such is irreducibly multiple. Its multiplicity is evident both in Heidegger's account, where epochal determination typically coincides with multiple *Bestimmungen*, and in the conceptual status of tone in music theory. Not unlike words in post-Saussurean linguistic theory, the sense of any given musical tone is determined not in a vacuum or in a one-to-one relation to an idea, image, or meaning. Sense arises through the differential links that a particular intonation sustains with other, contiguous tones. As Peter Fenves (1993) observes, tone, which derives from the Greek *tonos* (chord), implies reverberation—for instance, the vibration of a string or a vocal cord, as well as indistinct noise or din (the Latin *don* and the German *Ton*). The phenomenon that is tone in fact destroys any possibility of a stable core of self-identity. Tone describes an occurrence that is always differing with respect to itself. In that light, no tone could remain in possession of its own sense. Tonality first emerges phenomenally as *differing*, both within itself qua vibration and outside itself as variation on all other possible tones.

In the second part of this chapter, I turn to Marcelo Cohen's 1989 novel *El oído absoluto*, using these considerations of mood, thinking, and history to illuminate Cohen's reflections on the cultural, economic, and political reorganization of Southern Cone societies in the time of post-dictatorship. Written during the author's extended exile in Barcelona (1975–1996), the novel registers the exhaustion of a long history of utopian imaginaries in Latin America. The demise of the utopian tradition was initiated with the interruption of revolutionary projects of the 1960s and '70s under military dictatorship, and was then hastened by new forms of technological and economic globalization in the 1980s and '90s that culminated in neoliberal Consensus. While Cohen's novel was published in the years just prior to the neoliberal reforms initiated under Menem, it could be said to anticipate privatization in uncannily prescient fashion. Cohen's novel allegorizes this transformation by portraying the formal subsumption of the utopian horizon of modernity within a new social configuration defined by the *mediatization* of the real. The utopian emancipatory promise now appears as its simulacrum:

a theme park in which the social order is constituted through mediatic representation. In portraying the dystopian side of this postmodern simulacrum, Cohen's novel also seeks to revitalize the prospects for narrative processes in a world where contestatory politics and struggle against exploitation and domination have been rendered anachronistic.

While Jameson's theorization of postmodernity offers a helpful point of departure for reading the novel, especially when it comes to questions about how memories and wounds play a role in the formation of post-dictatorship topographies marked by the formal subsumption of the real within the cultural logic of transnational capitalism, it may be that we reach the limit of Jameson's usefulness at those points where Cohen's novel attests to a certain unease that arises in view of the instability of modern institutions in the time of post-dictatorship. These institutions include the modern state as mediator between the national and the global, the public sphere as domain of collective decision making and representation, and the national popular as political signifier of emancipation in Latin America. Cohen's novel provides an early assessment of the profound transformation of Argentine society during post-dictatorship, anticipating how neoliberal privatization reforms will facilitate the retreat of the political and the creation of a technocratic order of administration. The void left in the wake of privatization is filled by a mediatic façade of neopopulism, which displays all the characteristic appearances of populism (the charismatic leader, the public spectacle, disdain for intellectual elites in favor of popular sentimentality, and so on) while divesting itself of any social and economic reformist intentions that might threaten neoliberal Consensus.

Before I turn to a detailed discussion of *El oído absoluto*, a brief excursus into Cohen's published reflections on questions having to do with scientific and philosophical approaches to the relation between cognition and what we call reality will help to set the stage for my reading of Cohen's novel. In a more recent collection of essays published under the title *¡Realmente fantástico!* (2003), Cohen develops a sustained consideration of the relation between literature and the unmediated real that can shed additional light on the concerns of this chapter. An interesting tension is woven into that discussion. On one hand, Cohen asserts that the distinction between what we call reality and mind has never been less certain. He bases this claim not on the insights found in poststructuralist literary theory and psychoanalysis but on Erwin Schrödinger's contributions to quantum theory in

physics (more on that shortly). On the other hand, our contemporary world presents new configurations of power and violence for which the conceptual framework of modern thought does not appear to be helpful in explaining. Thus, the internal conflict within Cohen's 2003 essay anthology: one of the key discoveries in twentieth-century thought has to do with the fact that traditional distinctions between thinking and being, intellect and world, have turned out to be less clear and stable than previously believed, while our global situation today exposes a new reality for which old forms of thought lack sufficient explanatory power. Let us look first at a claim by Cohen that would call into question the old philosophical view of the separation between thought and being:

[For Spinoza] the world gives itself to us all at once, with no distinction between existence and perception. It is striking that many of the great modern physicists (Erwin Schrödinger among others) have insisted on similar ideas: that mind and matter are made of the same elements, and that the substance of which everything is made up consists of infinitely divisible elements that border on insubstantiality. (Cohen 2003, 134)

The second sentence is taken more or less verbatim from the third chapter of Schrödinger's 1958 book *Mind and Matter* (Schrödinger 1992), designed as a popular presentation of the intricacies of quantum mechanics, in which the physicist calls into question the subject/object distinction on which traditional theories of causality are based: "[T]he world is given to me only once, not one existing and one perceived" (126).<sup>14</sup> Ever since Plato, the metaphysical tradition has conceived of the difference between thought and the external world as a distinction between representation and being. Our perceptions, intuitions, and concepts may be near to or far from the truth, but they are never anything more than copies of an original that philosophy calls *being*. For Schrödinger, meanwhile, the distinction between thought and being is a product of the mind itself. To see why, let us recall that the concept of substance understood as *substans/substare* is analogous to the concept of subject understood as *subyectum*, that is, that which lies beneath appearances and logically precedes them as a cause precedes an effect. Since Aristotle, *substance* has referred to the matter (*hyle*) that is presumed