

## NARRATIVE AS A SOCIALLY LIBERATING ACT

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Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981, pp.305.

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*The Political Unconscious* is Jameson's most comprehensive and insightful work to date—yet it has many of the negative traits of his earlier books. Though it is a masterful treatment of dialectical criticism in both its theoretical and practical dimensions, it is also tortuously excessive and eclectic. In theoretical terms it tries to come to grips with the leading schools in modern literary criticism in order to transform and totalize them according to Jameson's own Marxist framework: Structuralism becomes hermeneutics and hermeneutics the unmasking of ideology with the differences between schools sometimes vanishing altogether. Ranging in Jameson's practice of criticism from the analysis of myth to the interpretation of romanticism, realism and modernism, the purpose of the book is to show how the repressed "political unconscious" lying behind such works of narrative can be recovered. The task of interpretation is to rewrite the text in terms of class struggle, the fundamental Marxist code, so that it becomes socially meaningful. Yet this code itself is open. This is the paradoxical core of Jameson's work: the fundamental story is incomplete and unfinished; the totality is "infinitely totalizable" (p. 53); the recovery of latent meaning is forever an alienated project. And this is the nature of history, the ever-present absence in history, in the light of which the ultimate task of the critic is to show how a literary text either hides or reveals this absence.

The vast scope of *The Political Unconscious* invites many different readings and entries into the text. One could concentrate on what Jameson has to say about interpretive practice, or one could simply focus on his extended discussions of writers like Balzac, Gissing and Conrad. Jameson's use of structuralism certainly challenges one to think out the latter's implications and limits, while his Marxist language opens the vast problem of Marxism and culture, particularly the problem of finding a non-reductive Marxist literary criticism. Such important but singular dimensions, however, cannot measure up to Jameson's total project. The "imperative to totalize" (p. 53), Jameson's implicit Pascalian wager, challenges the reader to appropriate his notion of historical narrative.<sup>1</sup>

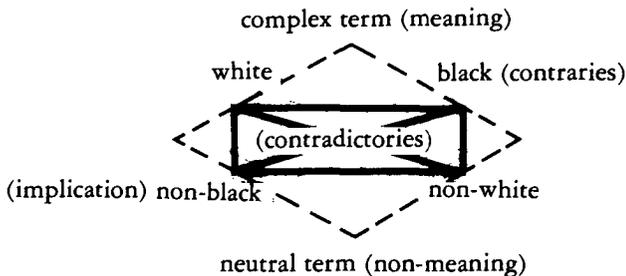
I will take up this challenge by focussing on the distinction between the wish-fulfilling "illusions" of romance—Jameson goes so far as to call romance "degraded narrative" (p. 255)—and the "truth" of historical narrative.<sup>2</sup> Jameson's "metacode" is a historical rewriting of the romantic search for a "lost Eden" (p. 110), rendering it in terms of the history of man's social and political

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relationship to the world in the fullness of its ambiguity. So too, it turns out, are the objects of his study, the works of Balzac, Gissing, and most important of all, Conrad.

Bearing this in mind, we can bracket the historical dimension in order to uncover the essential latent meaning behind romance. To borrow Ricoeur's expression, we can begin with a Marxist hermeneutic of demystification.<sup>3</sup> It is at this level that Jameson's debt both to Marxism and to structuralism is most evident. He distinguishes three overlapping and intertwining horizons of Marxist interpretation which are necessary for the understanding of a literary text: The text must be rewritten in terms of a Marxist metacode consisting of political history, social relations and the sequence of modes of production. Jameson uses Levi-Strauss in order to introduce his analysis of a given text as a politically significant symbolic act. According to Levi-Strauss, the structure of myth must be grasped in terms of a wish-fulfillment, or in Jameson's words, "an imaginary resolution of a real contradiction" (p. 77). This is the cornerstone on which Jameson builds his whole theory of what, following Lacan, he calls the Imaginary: the aesthetic act invents imaginary solutions to unresolvable but real social and political contradictions. Such solutions are more than mere reflections for they are acts whose purpose it is to symbolically transcend contradiction. This utopian dimension is ideological, however, because it is bound by these social contradictions, unable to realize their transformation.

Like myth, the romance narrative offers a salvational vision, the structure of which Jameson unveils as ideological closure using Greimas' semiotic rectangle. The rectangle consists of (1) a relation of contradictories: a simple term (white) and its binary opposition (non-white); (2) a relation of contraries: the simple term (white) and a contrary term (black); (3) the other terms generated by these two relations: a contradictory (black - non-black) and a subcontrary (non-black - non-white); (4) relations of implication: if white, then non-black; if black, then non-white. Out of this rectangle, Greimas generates four more categories: the complex term (white + black) and the neutral term (non-black + non-white) which are in a relation of contradiction; two other terms (white + non-black, and black + non-white) which are contraries. This can be sketched as follows:<sup>4</sup>



The complex term represents the meaning which brings together the human world in a significant whole (as white and black). It is the mythical unity which orders chaos.

While for Greimas the semiotic rectangle is the basic structure of all meaning, Jameson makes it the basic structure of all *closed* meaning, of ideology. It is a model of closure that maps out the limits of a historically specific social and political consciousness. By using it the critic is able to determine the basic terms of the particular political fantasy embedded in a literary text. The relation of contraries becomes for Jameson a basic social contradiction, while the complex term is the political fantasy resolving it. In Balzac's *La Vieille Fille*, there is, argues Jameson, a contradiction between Balzac's leanings towards the *ancien régime* and his recognition of the powerlessness of this tradition in the face of the rising bourgeoisie. The narrative must resolve the social contradiction between the powerless *ancien régime* and the powerful bourgeoisie. The first step in the resolution is reached when Napoleonic prowess is separated from bourgeois commercial activity. The *ancien régime* could save itself from the bourgeoisie if it were to recover for itself a form of Napoleonic energy. Thus the solution to the contradiction would be the unity of the two contraries, *ancien régime* and Napoleonic energy. This ideal or complex term, argues Jameson, is symbolically achieved with the appearance of the aristocratic and powerful officer, Comte de Troisville. His arrival at Mademoiselle Cormon's house is all the more indicative of the utopian solution because the town-house itself is the synthesis of the old (the courtyards and domestic household economy) and the new (the commercial and urban context in which it is set).

This political analysis directs us to the second horizon of Marxist interpretation. Embedded in the text is a discussion of class relations: feudal lordship versus the bourgeoisie. Shifting the analysis from Balzac to Gissing Jameson discusses the wider system of class discourse itself, this time examining relations between bourgeoisie and proletariat. At this level, the symbolic text is grasped as a particular strategic move in a broad ideological confrontation. What is important is not just the ideology of a particular text, but its relation to a class discourse made of "ideologemes." Jameson defines the ideologeme as "the smallest intelligible unit in the essentially antagonistic discourses of social classes" (p. 76). Like an individual text, the ideologeme is an imaginative narrative unity, a symbolical act resolving the social contradictions in a concrete historical situation. However, it is a *collective praxis* transcending any given individual text. Jameson uses as an example of an ideologeme the theory of *ressentiment*. Loosely distinguishing between the middle and the lower class, he presents nineteenth-century *ressentiment* as the anti-mob, bourgeois sentiment "Stay in your place!" The class contradiction is resolved in fantasy narratives upholding the naturalness or justice of social distinction. Gissing's *Demos* portrays the impossibility of the proletariat, irredeemable body as it is, controlling the means of production.

Marxist comprehension requires that one further horizon be brought into play in the interpretation of the individual text. The literary work and its ideologemes

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must be placed in the context of the sequence of modes of production. The transition from the feudal to the capitalist mode of production is a fundamental tension in Balzac's text. In Gissing, social relations are grounded in the capitalist mode of production, and implicitly, its possible replacement by a communist mode.

As in the political and social horizons, Jameson uses the model of contradiction and its imaginary resolution to discuss the structure of culture at this level. Greimas' essential contradiction is recast in terms of contradictory modes of production. (Jameson follows Poulantzas in using the idea of overlapping modes of production in order to avoid a reductive stage theory of culture.) The contradiction between modes of production is resolved in terms of the *form* of cultural production. This is because form (e.g., the romance genre) itself transmits an ideological message. The critic must analyse the text until he reveals the conflicting modes of production underlying it, and the way in which they are embedded in the form of the text. The romance work, for example, carries within itself the tension between two coexisting modes of production (usually found in the transition to capitalism). It resolves this in terms of a closed form projecting a utopian social resolution of contradiction.

While both Balzac and Gissing have been treated so far in terms of romance, it is Conrad whom Jameson uses to most clearly bring out the link between romance and mode of production. The second half of *Lord Jim*, argues Jameson, is a romance in which the fundamental contradiction is that between the religious passivity of precapitalist society and the frenetic activity of capitalism. Lord Jim is the romantic hero, the fantasy that unites the contraries of value and activity.

The problem not only with *Lord Jim* but also with many of the works of Balzac and Gissing is that they cannot as a whole be reduced to the romance genre. There is another Jim in Conrad's book who, far from being the "lord" uniting the contraries of value and activity in a utopian manner, is an existential hero condemned to freedom: Jim's "act itself suddenly yawns and discloses at its heart a void which is at one with the temporary extinction of the subject" (p. 260). Jim is the modernist who experiences in anguish his transcendence of space and time and simultaneously the necessity of ordering the discontinuity of time and absurdity of nature. But the truth of the narrative goes further, argues Jameson, beyond the individual experience of historicity towards the totality of history. Jim's discovery of Sartrean freedom has a demoralizing effect on the ideological myths allowing "the heroic bureaucracy of imperial capitalism" to assert its unity and legitimacy (p. 265). Thus the importance of *Lord Jim* does not rest in the ideological unity of value and activity, but in the critique of ideology. Jim's experience of history is a communication of man's freedom to endlessly transcend real contradictions rather than to simply try to romantically resolve them.

According to Jameson, Balzac and Gissing also confront romance with history, each in their own way. In Gissing's later works, the ethic of bourgeois *ressentiment* is unmasked as a mere ideologue. Bourgeois desire is presented as petty, worthless, commodity desire, something that the reader begins to dislike

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in himself. This *ressentiment* directed at oneself, however, dialectically transforms *ressentiment* as bad faith (flight from self) into authenticity (confrontation with one's relationship to history). Gissing's narratives generate "an omnipresent class consciousness in which it is intolerable for the bourgeois reader to dwell any length of time" (p. 205). In Balzac, a different movement leads to a similar position. The Comte de Troisville never does manage to fulfil Balzac's ideal resolution of aristocratic legitimacy and Napoleonic energy. Mademoiselle Cormon does not find her ideal man: he is married. The ideal resolution in Balzac is carefully contrasted with the lived reality that renders the romance impossible.

In order for criticism to be adequate to its object, it must come to grips with this historical repudiation of fantasy. Jameson sees Lacan's distinction between the Imaginary and the Symbolic as one step in this direction. The Imaginary, the realm of infantile wish-fulfilment in which desire is ignorant of reality, finds its completion in historical narrative. The story of the Comte de Troisville is an Imaginary text rewritten to fit the demands of the reality principle and the censorship of the superego. In order to satisfy itself, Desire must systematically confront the objections of the Real. When it recognizes "the unanswerable resistance of the real" (p. 183), it has reached the level of the symbolic text. Balzac's "incurable fantasy demands ultimately raise History itself over against him, as absent cause, as that on which desire must come to grief" (p. 183).

Everything in Jameson's work hinges on his use of this Althusserian notion of history as "absent cause." For Jameson, the movement from the Imaginary to the Symbolic or historical level can be formulated in terms of what happens when "plot falls into history" (p. 130) i.e., when romance structure or deep text is transformed through time into manifest text. According to Greimas, one can look at the way in which different semiotic structures formally combine using a static model called the *combinatoire*. Appropriating this term, Jameson applies it to the analysis of the dynamic relation between deep structure, manifest text and history. The deviation of the individual text from the deeper narrative structure directs us to the historical situation in which the imaginary wish is repressed and transformed. Deep plot is rewritten across the three horizons of politics (ideology), class struggle (ideologeme) and mode of production (ideology of form). The levels of the text are transformed, including its genre, as content becomes form.<sup>5</sup> Rather than ignore the diachronic dimension as Greimas does, the critic must locate plot in terms of history to render the transformation meaningful.

Jameson uses the term "homology" to apply to the reductive rewriting of a surface text (including its diachronic transformations) in terms of a deeper level or code. Greimas' model of the semiotic rectangle is homological in this sense, but so too would be any closed code such as is found in certain forms of Marxism (Jameson uses the example of Goldmann). If the three historical horizons are merely taken to be three dimensions of a fundamental Marxist metacode which can be applied to all superstructural activity, then Marxism is no more than homological reduction. Such a code would only be relevant to the realm of

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ideological closure. However, it would itself be trapped in this realm since its own code (or metacode) would be a closed narrative structure, a romantic story with a utopian vision of historical transcendence. The three historical horizons must therefore be seen precisely as horizons, as openings on to history, rather than as finite determinations of history.

In contrast to homological interpretation, a mythical approach to the movement of plot in history would concentrate not on determinate changes, but on identity over time. It presupposes an unbroken continuity in social relations and narrative forms from primitive to modern times. Frye's "positive hermeneutic" filters out historical difference to trace the continuity of an original myth through the levels of romance, tragedy, comedy, realism and other genres. His metacode, therefore, essentially reads all texts in terms of myth or its narrative transformation in romance. Whereas the Marxist metacode focussed on difference in order to arrive at the essential plot of history, Frye's method, however, focusses on identity, but arrives at perpetual change. Frye analyses each new remythicization of an original myth in what Jameson calls "figural" terms. The community celebrates its unity in terms of religious figures symbolizing the ultimate utopian classless society. These figures are constantly refigured in time as man experiences the impossibility of one utopia and seeks a new mythical possibility.

Jameson's critique of Frye lacks the precision of his critique of reductive Marxism, no doubt precisely because of his desire to avoid any type of closed structure such as the latter. He does, however, argue that Frye (and likewise Ricoeur) fails to deal with the ideological dimensions of utopia, that is, with what might be called false consciousness. He also points out that Frye incorrectly projects the categories of religion (the actor) on to those of myth. According to Jameson, characters in romances are merely passive "mortal spectators" who reap "the rewards of cosmic victory without ever having quite been aware of what was at stake in the first place" (p. 113). The implications of this critique are that myth must be demystified and man restored to his capacity to change history.

The historical approach must resolve the antinomy between myth and homology without collapsing into one or the other. The task of a properly Marxist hermeneutic is to reveal the condition of man in history, and the problems of ideological mystification—without creating a new myth. Pulling together such unlikely company as Lukács, Althusser and Sartre, Jameson attempts to come to grips with the foundations of such an approach.

Althusser distinguishes between what he calls "expressive causality" such as found in Hegelian Marxism, and his own "structural causality." Expressive causality interprets one phenomenon or text in terms of a mastercode i.e., in homological terms. Lukács' reduction of realism to material conditions is one example. In contrast, structural causality relies on a non-reductive notion of mode of production that includes the semi-autonomous spheres of culture, ideology, the juridical, the political and the economic. The cause of any phenomenon cannot be reduced to any other phenomenon (or level) but rather is

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the result of the entire structure of relationships. This structure is an "absent cause" since it is nowhere present as an element.

Jameson recognizes both the limits of this formulation, and its possibilities. He notes that Sartre criticizes Althusser for privileging the atemporal synchronic moment of the concept thus restoring a form of presence over absence.<sup>6</sup> However, one can go beyond what Althusser is apparently saying to establish a continuity between him and Hegel. The notion of "semi-autonomy," by its implication of identity and difference, is compatible with Hegel's dialectic. Both Hegel and Althusser are in fact criticizing identity theory. "The true is the whole" is not a positive closed truth for Hegel, but a method for unmasking the false (i.e. the ideological). Likewise, Lukács' notion of totality should not be read as a vision of the end of history, but as a methodological standard, a critical or negative ideal, on the basis of which ideological closure can be revealed. The negative status of this ideal ensures that it cannot be closed: the totality is infinitely totalizable. However, as in the Kantian ideal, the negative implies a positive, practical dimension, an imperative to totalize infinitely. At once affirmed and denied, the notion of totality rejoins Althusser's History and Lacan's Real as absent cause.

Totality is another name for narrative unity. History is only accessible in narrative form, but because it is infinitely totalizable it cannot be reduced to any given narrative. Narrative must present history as absent cause, not as absence, not as presence. Any symbolic act entertains an active relationship with the Real. The content of the Real is structured into form as it transforms form. However, it is only the historical text which has a form and content equal to this idea, for the romance text hides the process in the closure of ideology. Any narrator, be he writer, critic or historian, is bound by this imperative to totalize infinitely.

It is to Conrad's *Nostromo* that Jameson turns for his ultimate vision of history. "By a wondrous dialectical transfer," a history which cannot be narrated is inscribed in the form of the text itself (p.280). By a wondrous dialectical transfer, the semiotic rectangle opens onto history itself. The ideal act, (the complex term) which will found an "ideal" capitalist society out of "fallen" Latin American history (two contradictory modes of production) is *not* a utopian resolution: *Nostromo* will "insist to the end on everything problematic about the act that makes for genuine historical change" (p. 277). Yet out of the non-narratable collective process in which the individual acts of Decoud and Nostromo (the capitalist and the populist) are alienated and appropriated, capitalism arrives:

So this great historical novel finally achieves its end by unraveling its own means of expression, "rendering" History by its thoroughgoing demonstration of the impossibility of narrating this unthinkable dimension of collective reality, systematically undermining the individual categories of storytelling in order to project, beyond the stories it must continue to tell, the concept of a process beyond storytelling (p. 279).

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Historical criticism finds its completion in the historical act in Conrad. But is Jameson's form adequate to this content? His integration of theory with literary interpretation, as well as the dialectical turns, oppositions, resolutions and transformations of meaning in his text all point to the fundamental "openness" of his narrative. We must question, however, his sometimes excessive use of apparently closed structural and conceptual formulations. Is the identification and inventorying of ideologemes (p. 88) any more than pseudo-science? His focus on "collective" History makes one suspect a lingering, unresolved resentment against the bourgeois subject. Jameson constantly returns to Nietzsche only to reject "the constitutional ethical habit of the individual subject—the Eternal Recurrence" (pp. 234, 115). But is the Eternal Recurrence anything if not man transcending the individual finite subject, yet simultaneously bound by space and time? Is it not Nietzsche's allegory of infinite totalization?

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### Notes

1. According to Jameson, "the Pascalian wager of Marxism" lies in the bet that in a genuine community "the fundamental revelation of the nothingness of existence" will have lost its sting, though not its ontological truth. This ambivalent transposition of eternal life onto finite social relations hides Jameson's real affinity with Pascal (and, as we shall see, Sartre and Conrad). "Life is meaningless," says Jameson, but "History is meaningful" (p. 261). This is the movement from original sin to grace.
2. Jameson has been influenced by Sartre's literary criticism which revolves around a similar distinction. See, for example, Jameson's discussion of the difference between the "récit" and the "genuine novel," or the art form at one with its public and that which challenges society, in "Three Methods in Sartre's Literary Criticism," *Modern French Criticism: From Proust and Valéry to Structuralism*, ed. John K. Simon, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1972, p. 200 and pp. 222-223.
3. *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1970, p. 27.
4. A.J. Greimas and F. Rastier, "The Interaction of Semiotic Constraints," *Yale French Studies*, No. 41 (1968), particularly pp. 87-90.
5. See also *Marxism and Form: Twentieth Century Dialectical Theories of Literature*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971, p. 328.
6. According to Althusser, "the whole dialectic of transition [from the Imaginary to the Symbolic Order] in all its essential details is stamped by the seal of Human Order, of the Symbolic, for which linguistics provides us with the *formal* laws, i.e., the *formal* concept." As lack, Desire is nevertheless "determined" by this knowable *scientific* Order. In "Freud and Lacan," *New Left Review*, No. 55 (1969), pp. 61-62.