

THEORIES AND METHODOLOGIES

Jameson on Aesthetic Education

PHILLIP E. WEGNER

A central aim of Fredric Jameson's *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (1981) is to elaborate a mode of dialectical thinking, reading, and writing as "the anticipation of the logic of a collectivity which has not yet come into being" (297). If such a thinking necessarily involves what Jameson earlier characterizes as a heightened self-consciousness, an "awareness of the thinker's position in society and in history itself, and of the limits imposed on this awareness by his class position" (*Marxism* 340), the question arises: Why does *The Political Unconscious* four decades after its publication, along with so much more of Jameson's work, continue to draw me, and others, back time and again?

The answer lies in one of the more underappreciated aspects of Jameson's project: its deep investment in cultural and aesthetic education. Jameson makes this commitment explicit in an interview conducted shortly after the publication of *The Political Unconscious*:

I happen to think that no real systemic change in this country will be possible without the minimal first step of the achievement of a social democratic movement; and in my opinion even that first step will not be possible without two other preconditions (which are essentially the same thing): namely, the creation of a Marxist intelligentsia and that of a Marxist culture, a Marxist intellectual presence, which is to say, the legitimization of Marxist discourse as that of a "realistic" social and political alternative in a country which (unlike most of the other countries in the world) has never recognized it as such. This is the perspective in which I would want my own efforts to be understood. ("Interview" 13)

This isn't some earlier version of Jameson supposedly superseded by his later high-theoretical meditations on, say, postmodernism in the mid-1980s on into the early 1990s. He in fact expresses this same concern in 2005 when he directly addresses what's cultivated through a

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rigorous aesthetic education, which at present is unevenly distributed across different classes. Indeed, for Jameson, class subalternity is in part defined by

the lack of access to this or that mainstream culture, the way in which mainstream (or bourgeois) culture is marked as belonging to others and to some inaccessible upper-class or privileged elite; the sheer physical obstacles, finally, to the acquisition of culture by working people who have no leisure for its acquisition, or even for the acquisition of its preconditions. (“Monument” 389)

He elaborates:

[I]f the new cultural revolution, the new proletarian pedagogy . . . is a kind of aesthetic education, it is also very much an effacement of subalternity and a transcendence of the trauma of historical defeat, class oppression, alienated labor and the paralyzing humiliations of ignorance. The great works—those “monuments to radical instants”—are no doubt memorials of pain and suffering. . . . [B]ut the question is rather how to draw energy from such endless images of horror, how to enhance praxis and production by the spectacle of this charnel-house, the “nightmare of history”? (413)

The challenges of a “proletarian aesthetic education” (415) thus differ from those of an education for the privileged, our ivied Odysseuses chained to their masts:

[N]ot the philosophical or conceptual antinomies of form and content, but rather those of subalternity: fatigue after work, lack of access to knowledge and information, repudiation of the aesthetic as class privilege, underdevelopment, finally, of a stubborn will to appropriate the achievements of the dominant class—aesthetic as well as scientific and technological—in the interests of building a new social order. (415)

It cannot be emphasized enough that Jameson undertakes a similar project of radical aesthetic education throughout all his writings. Such labors involve introducing readers—who, like the rowers

on Odysseus’s ship, have their ears stuffed with the wax of conventional pedagogies—to works whose existence they may not even suspect; and providing them with tools to read these and other texts in ways that make it possible to think both the contingency of what is and the possibilities of what could and should be. This is an experience I can attest to both as a longtime reader of Jameson’s work, beginning as an undergraduate in the mid-1980s with *The Political Unconscious*—and subsequently as a reader of a good deal of what he first introduced to me—and in my experiences from 1987 to 1993 as a student in Duke University’s then newly minted Graduate Program in Literature.

Such a pedagogical labor continues unabated in Jameson’s most recent work. For example, in the final chapter of *The Benjamin Files* (2020), he brings renewed attention to Walter Benjamin’s 1930 review of Siegfried Kracauer’s study *Die Angestellten: Aus dem neuesten Deutschland* (*The White-Collar Workers of Contemporary Germany*). Jameson groups this short piece among “Benjamin’s most significant pronouncements on the subject of social class,” before advancing what may be for some a startling claim: “Everything [Benjamin] wrote was steeped in his awareness of himself as a bourgeois intellectual and of the inevitable limitations this class status imposes” (240). Jameson then proceeds to quote the following remarkable passage from Benjamin’s review:

This left-radical wing may posture as much as it likes—it will never succeed in eliminating the fact that the proletarianization of the intellectual hardly ever turns him into a proletarian. Why? Because from childhood on, the middle class gave him a means of production in the form of an education—a privilege that establishes his solidarity with it and, perhaps even more, its solidarity with him. This solidarity may become blurred superficially, or even undermined, but it almost always remains powerful enough to exclude the intellectual from the constant state of alert, the sense of living your life at the front, which is characteristic of the true proletarian.

(*Benjamin Files* 240)

History may not be destiny, but it shapes in fundamental ways our stances in the world.

Following Jameson's lead and turning to the review itself, the reader discovers that Benjamin further describes Kracauer's book as "a milestone on the road toward the politicization of the intelligentsia" (309). This is because in it "we find a constructive theoretical schooling that addresses neither the snob nor the worker, but is able to promote something real and demonstrable—namely, the politicization of the writer's own class. This indirect impact is the only one a revolutionary writer from the bourgeoisie can aim at today" (310). I would suggest that Benjamin's characterization of Kracauer also might be applied to Jameson in his efforts at politicizing multiple generations of intellectuals from his own class, some of whom I imagine are reading this essay.

However, the fact is that Jameson and I were educated in different situations and we hail from different backgrounds. He is thirty years my senior (we were born, respectively, in 1934 and 1964) and our educations thus took place at the beginning and tail end of what Christopher Newfield identifies as the great post-World War II United States experiment in higher education. Moreover, I come from a working-class conservative Catholic family and am a first-generation public university graduate for whom the very idea of the life of an engaged intellectual was until my studies commenced unimaginable and for long thereafter utopian. Furthermore, my undergraduate education took place in the second tier of California's post-1960 Master Plan for Higher Education system. The Master Plan unified all the existing universities and colleges into three tiers, the top being the research and doctoral granting University of California campuses; the middle, the state teaching colleges that would ultimately become the California State University schools; and the lowest, the junior colleges serving primarily as feeders into the other two tiers. In a 1969 article concerning the political clashes underway in California, *Life* magazine described my institution, then named San Fernando Valley State College and now California State University, Northridge (CSUN), as "a modest school, offering more training than education, producing society's workers rather than its managers" (Nevin 60; also see Davis and Wiener 503–23).

CSUN is known today primarily for its use as a Hollywood film location—serving as the site of the climactic tournament in *The Karate Kid* (1984) and Starfleet Headquarters in *Star Trek* (2009)—and as the undergraduate institution of a young man (who is a direct, albeit fictional, contemporary of mine and another classmate, the second gentleman of the United States, Doug Emhoff) who meets a grim fate in *Boogie Nights* (1997).

As a result, and despite the very real successes I have experienced—and in acknowledgment of my status as what Bruce Robbins terms a "beneficiary" in a savagely inequitable global order and Michael Rothberg an "implicated subject" in multiple injustices, especially those of race, gender, and planetary location—much of my experience from the early days of my graduate education onward has involved what Benjamin terms a "sense of living your life at the front." While the external markers of difference of gendered, racialized, and other Othered subjects may be absent, what still runs deep in me is what Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno refer to late in *Dialektik der Aufklärung (Dialectic of Enlightenment)* when they write that "stupidity is a wound" ("Dummheit ist ein Wundmal") produced when "the play of the muscles on awakening is inhibited instead of being encouraged" (322). This has included repeated and often painful reminders of the limitations of my early life experiences; the gnawing sense that even today "I don't have the words, they didn't teach me the words" (Strugatsky and Strugatsky 145); an awareness of the university as a place that Sara Ahmed describes as "not shaped by or for us" (9–10); and, perhaps most significant, an abiding recognition of the sheer contingency and precarity of my position— isn't it far more likely that the bucket missed its mark and Dorothy and her comrades were torn limb from the limb by the witch's army?—and the ease and swiftness with which it could crumble away.

As I was first drafting this essay, the truth of this last was brought home once again by a story in *The New Yorker* by Graciela Mochkofsky on the shameful treatment and ultimate denial of tenure at Harvard University of Lorgia García Peña, an

accomplished and dedicated activist-scholar and first-generation immigrant from the Dominican Republic who “had been undocumented when she arrived in the United States.” Mochkofsky bluntly acknowledges, “There is an unwritten rule in academia that says that, while you are up for tenure, you stay away from anything resembling conflict. García Peña, to some colleagues’ shock and to others’ admiration, did not abide by this law.” Mochkofsky then quotes the Harvard professor of Latin American history Kirsten Weld, who adds, “And, just by virtue of her existence and who she is, she was always violating this sort of unspoken norm on the campus.” What Mochkofsky also makes apparent is that it was far less race or gender than Peña’s activism and naïveté concerning the realities of the neoliberal university that led to her dismissal.

The real differences between my experiences of academia and those of many (but by no means all) of my fellow students and colleagues was brought home during my dissertation research when I had the opportunity first to read Jack London’s *The People of the Abyss* (1903) and *The Road* (1907) alongside two works they inspired, George Orwell’s *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933) and *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1936). Whereas Orwell always conveys a sense of distance between himself and the destitute “down and out” peoples about whom he so sympathetically writes, for London no such luxury is possible. This is because, as I maintain in my first book, *Imaginary Communities* (2002)—a book I had modeled on *The Political Unconscious*—“London’s knowledge of what it meant to be part of the ‘most suffering class’ was direct: that is, London did not have to imaginatively ‘identify’ with the condition of the unskilled laborer because he had experienced it firsthand in his own youth” (142). For London, something of which I was also then keenly aware, the slightest misstep threatened a fall back into the abyss from which he had so recently climbed. The circles of such a hell for my extended family in our not dissimilar neoliberal times include the loss of even the illusion of job security, unexpected and unwarranted firings and concomitant financial

instability, long-term unemployment, insufficient health and child care, alcohol and substance abuse, divorce, imprisonment, isolation, depression, despair, and even early death.

Such a sense of critical distance is also fundamental to what remains for many a primary task of literary and cultural critics: “disinterested” aesthetic judgement, a capacity cultivated from childhood on in those whom Matthew Arnold calls “the great men of culture” to distinguish between “the best knowledge and thought of the time, and a true source, therefore, of sweetness and light” and “all that was harsh, uncouth, difficult, abstract, professional, exclusive” (4). In one of the few interviews I had shortly after receiving my degree (the result of which was a single job offer—and let me here again extend my profound gratitude to the faculty then at the University of Florida for deciding to take a chance on me), an at-the-time prominent critic abruptly interrupted my opening presentation to ask if I considered the various utopian narratives on which I had focused my attention to be any “good”—and if not, he inquired, why waste our time studying them? As I stumblingly tried to suggest that their influence in their moment, and even ours, made them of “interest,” he scoffed, and the interview was at its end. I should not have been surprised by my interlocutor’s disdain, since Harold Bloom, whom I cited in my dissertation, had only a few years earlier felt serenely confident in dismissing Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) as a “literary period piece” whose “defense . . . cannot differ much from a defense of period pieces in clothes, household objects, popular music, movies, and the lower reaches of the visual arts” (cited in *Imaginary Communities* 184). Moreover, it is the lack of distance between Jameson and myself—I am his student, after all—that led to some critiques of what was understood as my too affirmative treatment of his project in *Periodizing Jameson* (2014).

This mode of evaluative criticism became a dominant aspect of the Anglo-American university in the decades following the Second World War, and it is in response to it that Jameson formulates in *The Political Unconscious* another practice of reading. In the book’s opening chapter, Jameson

identifies “ethical criticism” as “still the predominant form of literary and cultural criticism today” and the “code in terms of which the question ‘What does it mean?’ tends to be answered” (59). Fundamental to such a practice of criticism is the binary of good and evil:

Evil thus, as Nietzsche taught us, continues to characterize whatever is radically different from me, whatever by virtue of precisely that difference seems to constitute a real and urgent threat to my own existence. . . . [T]he essential point to be made is not so much that he is feared because he is evil; rather he is evil because he is Other, alien, different, strange, unclean, and unfamiliar. (115–16)

Jameson later identifies the ethical binary as “the paradigmatic form of all ideology,” and thus that for “which it was the vocation of the dialectic (and its unity of opposites) to overcome and to transcend” (*Valences* 18, 64). And like all other ideological forms, judgments are what Roland Barthes describes as mythologies and Sianne Ngai as performative utterances “that perform best when disguised as a constative” (40).

While Jameson fully accepts the Althusserian maxim that there is no outside of ideology, he maintains that it is possible to practice modes of reading that have outcomes very different from those adopted by the dominant and effective core. The consequences of this shift are quite profound. Colin MacCabe famously observes of Jameson, “The range of his analysis, from architecture to science fiction, from the tortuous thought of late Adorno to the *testimonio* novel of the third world, is extraordinary; it can truly be said that nothing cultural is alien to him” (ix). This does not mean that Jameson “knows” all cultural texts, although, as MacCabe confirms, his reach can at times be daunting. Such knowledge would constitute the content of Jameson’s thought rather than its form. Instead, Jameson engages in practices of reading that allow the reader to remain open to learning something of value from almost everything, from the celebrated monuments of the older canons to the seemingly most ephemeral of contemporary commercial

productions and across different genres, media, and historical traditions. This is what Gregory of Nyssa, one of the founders of the four-fold allegorical reading practice Jameson champions, means when he proclaims, “Although there may be nothing useful for you in my words, perhaps this example of ready obedience will not be wholly unprofitable to you” (3). The result is an abiding sense, evident in both Gregory’s and Jameson’s work, of joy in discovery and the pleasures of new and unexpected encounters.

At the same time, Jameson consistently practices deep listening (*l’écoute*), what he describes in one of the key preparatory essays for *The Political Unconscious* as an “attention beyond the self or the ego, but one that may need to use those bracketed personal functions as instruments for hearing the Other’s desire” (“Imaginary” 118). However, this is not the same as methodological pluralism or shallow liberal tolerance. Rather, armed with an uncompromising fidelity to the problematic of Marxism—“here conceived as that ‘untranscendable horizon’ that subsumes . . . apparently antagonistic or incommensurable critical operations” (*Political Unconscious* 10)—Jameson recovers things of value that escape other readers. On this basis he produces dazzling analytic assemblages out of what might seem on more superficial approaches to be opposed traditions and projects.

Of equal significance, for me at least, is the immense generosity that results from such reading practices. The aim of moralizing judgements is to create communities by way of exclusion, where the members of the group are defined first and foremost by what they are not and the things they do not do. Jameson’s practice, by contrast, works to build expansive and inclusive collectivities whose members, while coming from different histories, experiences, and standpoints, are willing to listen to one another and work together in the confidence that they share a common project. In this, *The Political Unconscious* and Jameson’s other work offer glimpses of wholly other ways of being and doing, not only in our academic communities but within the larger worlds we make together. It was this alternative I now finally understand that I found so

inviting, despite its myriad other challenges, when I first read *The Political Unconscious*, and it is one to which I remain deeply committed—not only for myself and others who share my experiences, but for all those whom Bertolt Brecht refers to as *die Nachgeborenen*, “those who follow in our wake” (Horton).

NOTE

This essay is dedicated to the memory of my brother, Stephen Wegner (1971–2021).

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