Fredric Jameson’s laments

by Roger Kimball

[It is rather the essential “innocence” of intellectuals which is here in question: this private inner game of theoretical “convictions” and polemics against imaginary conceptual antagonists and mythic counterpositions, . . . of passionate private languages and private religions, which, entering the field of force of the real social world, take on a murderous and wholly unsuspected power.
—Fredric Jameson, Fables of Aggression

Among the stars twinkling in the academic firmament these days, none twinkles more formidably than the Marxist literary critic Fredric Jameson. Having taught at Harvard, Yale, and at various campuses of the University of California, Professor Jameson is now ensconced at Duke University—that favored perch for so many academic twinklers today—where he is William A. Lane Professor of Comparative Literature and Director of the Graduate Program in Literature as well as the Duke Center for Critical Theory. His influence in the academy is as widespread as his epigones are numerous. Graduate students and fellow professors eagerly lap up and regurgitate his latest pronouncements on “late capitalism,” etc.; recondite academic journals devote entire issues to pondering his work; and admiring acolytes publish commentaries that attempt to unravel the “demanding argument” of his “seminally important” books, describing him along the way as “the most important Marxist critic now writing.”

Like most Marxists, Professor Jameson likes to refer to art and to intellectual work as a “mode of production”; certainly, there is no more polite term for his own prodigious output. Since publishing Sartre: The Origins of a Style (1961; new edition 1984), a revision of his Ph.D. dissertation for Yale University, Professor Jameson has been a veritable factory for the production of books and articles that blend some degree of Marxist “engagement” with a finely honed exhibition of the most au courant critical rhetoric. A partial list of his books includes Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature (1971), The Prison House of Language: A Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism (1972), Fables of Aggression: Wyndham Lewis, the Modernist as Fascist (1979), The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act (1981), and The Ideologies of Theory, a two-volume compilation of essays (Volume I, “Situations of Theory,” Volume II, “Syntax of History”) published in 1988. Among his more recent publications are Signatures of the Visible, a collection of essays about the movies and mass culture, and Postmodernism: Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism.
The book about postmodernism is also a collection of essays, but its lengthy methodological reflections and Professor Jameson’s remark that it is intended to be “the third and last section of the penultimate subdivision of a larger project entitled *The Poetics of Social Forms*” help to suffuse it with the atmosphere—if not, finally, the reality—of systematic inquiry.

Indeed, “atmosphere” has surely counted for rather a lot in the reception Professor Jameson’s work has enjoyed. While his subject and vocabulary are always strictly *a la mode*, his syntax and organization have usually been almost decorously pedantic, even ponderous. As the invocation of the “penultimate subdivision of a larger project” suggests, Professor Jameson loves the rigorously-sounding argot of formal academic prose. His books are full of technicalities, *wissenschaftlich* grace notes—well, notes, anyway—and schematic diagrams replete with arrows and dotted lines connecting various abstract terms. Whether his work actually possesses the conceptual rigor that such decorations connote is something we shall have occasion to consider; it is unlikely, at any rate, that anyone will accuse Professor Jameson of ignoring his own warning against “the mischief of premature clarification.”

Yet whatever one’s judgment about the clarity or fruitfulness of Professor Jameson’s work—to say nothing of his influence or his political ideas—it is difficult not to be impressed by his unflagging energy and earnestness. Most of his books are at least partly attempts to come to terms with some fashionable new critical method or school of thought. And if one must conclude that his efforts at exposition are often as bewildered as they are bewildering, there is no doubt that he possesses a tirelessly inquiring mind: no one would saturate himself so thoroughly in so many arcane theories *merely* to be fashionable. While this does nothing to exempt his work from criticism, it does endow it with a certain pathos.

In any event, besides Sartre—and, of course, the writings of Marx himself—the formative influences on Professor Jameson’s prose and style of thought are such certified left-wing saints as Herbert Marcuse, Ernst Bloch, Louis Althusser, Walter Benjamin, and, above all, Georg Lukács and Theodor Adorno. In the background is the figure of Hegel with his doctrine of necessary historical progress. What it all adds up to is a heady brew of radical utopianism (from Marcuse and Bloch), seasoned with the pretense of scientific rigor (from Althusser) and an aestheticized Marxism (from Benjamin). In addition, from Lukacs Professor Jameson learned a contempt for the evidence of experience (empiricism, he declared in *The Political Unconscious*, is “a contradiction in terms”) as well the talismanic charm that words like “reification,” “ideology,” and “dialectical” can have over susceptible minds. And from Adorno he learned—indeed, he mastered—the joys of epistemological skepticism and difficult “dialectical” writing. (Compared to Adorno, Hegel reads like Dr. Johnson.) More recently, Professor Jameson has drawn on the whole panoply of chic contemporary theorists, from the two Jacques (Derrida and Lacan) to Jean Baudrillard, Michel Foucault, Richard Rorty, and many, many others.

The case of Adorno is particularly instructive. In the preface to Marxism and Form, Professor Jameson speaks admiringly of the German philosopher as “the finest stylist. . . of them all,” a
writer in whose sentences “the shifting of the world’s gears . . . find[s] sudden and dramatic formulation. It is not,” he portentously adds, “a question of taste, any more than the validity of dialectical thinking is a question of opinion.” This is History speaking, you understand (Professor Jameson often employs a capital “H” for the word “history”), not simply the bleatings of a philosophically inclined professor of literature. It may be useful, then, to make a quick reality check and sample a bit of Adorno’s prose. In a typical passage from *Negative Dialectics*, his chief philosophical work, the finest stylist of them all writes that

No matter how nondimensional we may make Being, how we may compress it into a point by the permanent exercise of caution in both directions, the procedure does have its *fundamentum in re*. Categorial vision, the growing awareness of a concept, reminds us that categorically constituted facts, which traditional epistemology knew as syntheses only, must always have a corresponding moment beyond the sensory *hyle* [i.e., matter]. They always have something immediate about them, something resembling visuality. A simple mathematical theorem would not apply without the synthesis of the figures between which the equation is set up, and neither . . . would a synthesis be possible if the relation of elements were not in line with this synthesis . . .

Perhaps that noise you hear is the world’s gears grinding away; but then again it may only be the gnashing of teeth. (Adorno does not, I regret to say, read any better in German.)

It is worth recalling this patch of Teutonic fog—and Professor Jameson’s judgment about its author—as one tries to evaluate some of the more extravagant claims made on Professor Jameson’s behalf. For example, Terry Eagleton, the British literary critic who is Professor Jameson’s chief rival for the title of “most important Marxist critic now writing,”[2] has delivered himself of lavish praise for the Jamesonian style. “Jameson composes rather than writes his texts,” he wrote in one essay, “and his prose . . . carries an intense libidinal charge, a burnished elegance and unruffled poise, which allows him to sustain a rhetorical lucidity through the most tortuous, intractable materials.” In another essay, “Fredric Jameson: The Politics of Style,” Professor Eagleton goes even further:

I must acknowledge that I take a book of his from the shelf as often in place of poetry or fiction as literary theory. ... If ‘literary criticism’ is to be one day justified at the judgement seat of history—if we will be able to claim that it played a bit part in the averting of fascism or nuclear holocaust—Jameson may have the oppressive pleasure of knowing that that his is one of the forlornly few names we will stammeringly evoke.

Amen. Again, though, a reality check is in order. How do you reckon the following passage from *The Political Unconscious* will measure up as a prophylactic against fascism?

The constitutive feature of the Balzacian narrative apparatus, however, is something more fundamental than either authorial omniscience or authorial intervention, something that may be designated as
libidinal investment or authorial wish-fulfillment, a form of symbolic satisfaction in which the working distinction between biographical subject, Implied Author, reader, and characters is virtually effaced.

True, libidinal charges and investments are high on the wish-lists of these Marxist critics; but does that transform their prose into a nuclear deterrent? Consider: “The postmodern period, however,” Professor Jameson tells us in his new book on the subject, “eschews temporality for space and has generally grown skeptical about deep phenomenological experience in general, and the very concept of perception itself in particular (see Derrida).”

Part of what has made Professor Jameson so appealing to his academic colleagues is his enthusiastic industriousness; one can go to his newest book and be sure of getting news about the latest literary-critical fad from the inside. For while his books typically contain a good deal of summary and recapitulation of whatever intellectual theories are currently on their way up—The Prison House of Language, for example, is really little more than an introduction to the central texts and tenets of structuralism—Professor Jameson always takes the trouble to work through the material and to present it with his own distinctive twist. In this sense, his books resemble daily weather reports: they’re often wrong, but they’re always up to date.

Then, too, Professor Jameson’s version—or versions—of Marxism are pleasingly, well, sophisticated. It’s rare that you find him arguing for economic determinism or the proletariat or the revolution in any straightforward way. True, he is able to write, without irony, that “Only Marxism can give us an adequate account of the essential mystery of the cultural past” or that “Marxist critical insights” provide “something like an ultimate semantic precondition for the intelligibility of literary and cultural texts.” But in fact he by no means allows himself to be hemmed in by what he often calls “properly Marxist” interpretations. He regularly updates, supplements, massages ideas culled from Marx while mixing and matching interpretive categories drawn from later Marxist and quasi-Marxist thinkers. If this makes for rather a thick stew, so be it. His main task is not to explain but to interpret: to affirm “the priority of the political interpretation of literary texts,” emerging therefrom slightly but perceptibly to the left of his interlocutors. And in this Professor Jameson has shown himself to be a something of a master.

In the end, it is not Marxism so much as a generalized left-leaning radicalism—what the critic Frederick Crews aptly summed up as Left Eclecticism—that informs Professor Jameson’s critical enterprise. Marxism itself functions as a reservoir of slogans and political animus, but its fundamental tenets are often neglected in favor of other more recherché critical approaches and attitudes. At the beginning of Signatures of the Visible, for example, Professor Jameson claims that “The visual is essentially the pornographic, which is to say that it has its end in rapt, mindless fascination.” While certainly a fatuously provocative claim, there is nothing specifically Marxist about it. Nor is there anything specifically Marxist about his claim that the movie Diva is an expression of “the political unconsciousness,” that Joseph Conrad’s novel Nostromo is “a textual apparatus for registering auditory perceptions of a particularly pure type,” or that Hemingway’s novels are not really about “such things as courage, love, and death” but “simply the writing of a
certain type of sentence.” Marxism isn’t the only form of political balderdash.

Even when he deliberately invokes Marxist categories, Professor Jameson’s interpretations are often so thoroughly academicized that their political point dissolves in a vaguely leftist haze. Consider his comments on *Wuthering Heights*: “Heathcliff,” he writes,

is the locus of history in this romance: his mysterious fortune makes him a protocapitalist, in some other place, absent from the narrative, which then recodes the new economic energies as sexual passion. The aging of Heathcliff then constitutes the narrative mechanism whereby the alien dynamism of capitalism is reconciled with the immemorial (and cyclical) time of the agricultural life of a country squiredom.... To see “Heathcliff” as a historical modification of the function of the donor thus allows us to glimpse the ideologeme—the conceptual antinomy but also the social contradiction— which generates the narrative, but which it is the latter’s mission to “resolve.”

When applied to some authors, Professor Jameson’s procedure borders on the surreal. We find the exquisite lyric poetry of Wallace Stevens, for example, dissected as “an extraordinary laboratory situation in which to observe the autonomization of culture as a process,” a process in which “the poetic ‘totality’ begins to trace a ghostly mimesis of the totality of the imperialist world system itself, with Third World materials in a similarly strategic, marginal, yet essential place.” What happened to Stevens? Thus does the author of *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction* become the author of *Notes toward a Supreme Farce*. Even the bric-a-brac of Frank Gehry’s “deconstructivist” architecture is enlisted in this misty Left Eclecticism: “The problem, then, which the Gehry house tries to think is the relationship between that abstract knowledge [of “American space”] and conviction or belief and the superstate and the existential daily life of people in their traditional rooms and tract houses.” Gehry’s house is a pretentious curiosity, to be sure, but it is not the tortured manifesto that Professor Jameson’s description would lead us to expect.

Another classic way in which Professor Jameson announces his political bona fides is through ritual expressions of anti-Americanism interlaced with admiring noises about China, the Third World, and so on. “I doubt,” he writes in the preface to *Marxism and Form*, “if there are many people left who feel that there is much in either art or in our society itself—at least in the extreme that it has reached in the United States today— which is worth salvaging.” He later laments that “Unfortunately, no society has ever been quite so mystified in quite so many ways as our own.” We must of course be grateful that, having escaped such widespread mystification himself, he has come bearing news of our distress.

Nevertheless, if things are bad in this country, at least there is hope in other parts of the world. For example, in an essay called “Marxism and Historicism” (1979) Professor Jameson writes admiringly about the “structural coexistence of several modes of production” that the Chinese experience of “‘cultural revolution’” has made available to us, while in “Periodizing the 60s” (1984) he speaks of Maoism as the “richest of all the great new ideologies of the 60s.” In that same essay, he rhapsodizes about the “voluntaristic acts” of guerrillas and other “new revolutionary
subjects” who “transcend class categories.” And in case the word “guerrilla” worries you, Professor Jameson offers assurances that Marxism dissociates itself from “what is often loosely called ‘terrorism’”; moreover, according to him, terrorism is largely “a symptomatic fantasy of the American political unconscious” that “for all practical purposes [came] to an end with the Chilean coup in 1973.” I feel sure that the families of the 250 Marines who died in a terrorist attack in Lebanon in the early Eighties will be consoled by Professor Jameson’s assurances that “for all practical purposes” terrorism was over long ago, as will the friends and relatives of those who perished on the Pan Am plane that was destroyed by terrorists over Lockerbie, Scotland, a few years ago.

Perhaps Professor Jameson’s most flexible tool of critical legerdemain is the word “dialectical.” At bottom it is little more than a positive epithet, putting the reader on notice that whatever it qualifies (“dialectical thinking” “dialectical criticism” etc.) has the Jameson Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval. And as a mask for banality or an agent of mystification it is really quite wonderful. Generally, describing something as “dialectical” means little more than that it appears one way when viewed from one perspective, quite differently when viewed from another perspective. Sometimes, though, the term produces a convenient tautology, as when Professor Jameson solemnly informs us that “for Adorno—as indeed for Hegel, as for all dialectical thinkers to the degree that they are genuinely dialectical—thinking dialectically means nothing more or less than the writing of dialectical sentences.” On other occasions it provides rhetorical effects of which even Polonius would be proud. What, Professor Jameson asks, is dialectical criticism?

It can be described as a kind of leap-frogging affair in time, in which the drawbacks of a given historical situation turn out in reality to be its secret advantages, in which what looked like built-in superiorities suddenly prove to set the most ironclad limits on its future development. It is a matter, indeed, of the reversal of limits, of the transformation from negative to positive and from positive to negative; and is basically a diachronic process.

“... basically a diachronic process” is an exquisite Polonian flourish, to be sure; and if the idea still isn’t clear, Professor Jameson follows up with an “objective” illustration having to do with technological discrepancies between the United States and the Soviet Union after World War II.

Finally, however, what makes “dialectical” indispensible is the existential—or is it theological—charge with which Professor Jameson invests the term. Describing dialectical criticism as “an operation of rectification, of almost ontological restitution,” he goes on to note that its only real competitor is religious criticism. (Religion, incidentally, he defines as “that set of imaginary propositions which must be believed to be true if the theoretical consequences of Marxism are to be avoided” and “anticipatory foreshadowings of historical materialism.”)

Alas, the idea that dialectical criticism somehow entails an “ontological restitution” brings us more or less to the center of Professor Jameson’s critical enterprise. For although he is as adept at dispensing skepticism and disenchantment as any critic now writing, there is a deep element of
romantic utopianism in Professor Jameson’s thought. The precise components of that utopianism are difficult to parse because he is careful to embroider it with all manner of Marxist warnings against “idealism,” “false consciousness,” and other forms of bourgeois illusion: the “dialectical” criticism he practices is nothing if not negative. But like Marxism itself, the Jamesonian creed could not function without the promise of something like salvation, however dour or severe. Thus it is that Professor Jameson insists on “the necessity of the reinvention of the Utopian vision in any contemporary politics,” identifying the Utopian impulse as “part of the legacy of the sixties which must never be abandoned.”

The basic scenario is a familiar one. In brief, Professor Jameson argues that the “contradictions of capitalism” will be resolved and freedom will reign when a new, communistic “mode of production” allows us to transcend the limiting need for individuality, as well as private property, social hierarchies, power relations, etc. Marxism, he writes in one typical passage, is “the anticipatory expression of a future society, . . . the partisan commitment to that future or Utopian mode of production which seeks to emerge from the hegemonic mode of production of our own present.” We should not, however, think that we as individuals can enter Utopia, for “a properly Marxist hermeneutic” requires that individual Utopias be “rewritten in terms of the collective”: “Dialectical thought,” we are told, is the “anticipation of the logic of a collectivity which has not yet come into being.”

In good Hegelian-Marxist fashion, the achievement of freedom is at the same time the realization of Necessity (again, Professor Jameson’s capital) and the fulfillment of History. In one sense, this great social advance is at the same time a return to an earlier state insofar as “The primary energy of revolutionary activity derives from [a] memory of a prehistoric happiness.” While the prehistoric state is variously identified with primitive communism and prenatal existence (“we have known, at the beginning of life, a plenitude of psychic gratification”), not much is said about it or the collective existence that it presages.

We do learn, however, that in this Utopian future the literature of “power societies” “will be read as children’s books, recapitulating the barely comprehensible memory of ancient dangers.” Moreover, art generally—at least when it is genuine—has as its “underlying impulse . . . our deepest fantasies about the nature of social life” and aims to “reawaken” the “drive towards collectivity.” Hence we should “rid ourselves” of the habit of reading as an individual: rid ourselves, that is to say, of thinking about “my personal reading of an individual text written by a biographical individual names [sic] Spenser or Juvenal.”

In The Political Unconscious, Professor Jameson attempts to picture Utopia by means of allegory. Drawing on Northrop Frye’s Anatomy of Criticism and medieval Christian theology, he elaborates a complex fourfold scheme of interpretation in which Dante’s theory of mystical or anagogic meaning is recast in terms of politics. It cannot be said that this really helps to explain what the alternative to reading “as an individual” might be; but one suspects from his more recent work that it will have something to do with the movies and pop culture. Much of Professor Jameson’s
work since the mid-Eighties has been devoted to “transcoding” pop culture, and the results of his efforts are often deliriously “collective.” In *Signatures of the Visible*, for example, Professor Jameson informs us that the pulp horror movie called *The Shining* gestures faintly toward an “anticipatory representation of the Utopian community of the future.” Its star, Jack Nicholson, is, according to Professor Jameson, “possessed by . . . History,” while the movie itself expresses “the longing for collectivity” and is at bottom a “depth analysis and ‘working out’ of the class fantasies of contemporary American society.” Clearly, a large dollop of credulity is necessary to appreciate the workings of the dialectic.

If all this seems obscure, rest assured that it is obscure. But then we should recall that the real meaning of “utopia” is “no place.” Whatever Professor Jameson’s personal commitment to Marxist doctrine, there can be little doubt that his habits of thought are deeply tinged by the gnostic contempt for everyday experience and faith in a secular apocalypse that has characterized Marxism from the beginning. As the philosopher Leszek Kolakowski noted in the third volume of his magisterial study, *Main Currents of Marxism*, this is the ultimate source of Marxism’s Utopian dreams and its great seductiveness for suitably disposed intellectuals. “The influence that Marxism has achieved,” Kolakowski wrote, far from being the result or proof of its scientific character, is almost entirely due to its prophetic, fantastic, and irrational elements. Marxism is a doctrine of blind confidence that a paradise of universal satisfaction is awaiting us just around the corner. Almost all the prophecies of Marx and his followers have already proved to be false, but this does not disturb the spiritual certainty of the faithful, any more than it did in the case of chiliastic sects. ... In this sense Marxism performs the function of a religion, and its efficacy is of a religious character. But it is a caricature and a bogus form of religion, since it presents its temporal eschatology as a scientific system, which religious mythologies do not purport to be.

That the Marxist apocalypse is declared to be the inevitable result of inscrutable “scientific” laws only means that its partisans are potentially as dangerous as they are mystifying: the revolutionary is one whose possession of “the truth” is impervious to experience. For him, “History” speaks with a voice beyond contradiction or appeal.

While the prospect of utopia has receded somewhat in his recent work—in one place in *Postmodernism*, he comes close to identifying utopia with the status quo of postmodern society—Professor Jameson cannot be said to have abandoned his faith in History. Nevertheless history sometimes seems to have failed him. Confronting the increasing chaos of postmodern society, Professor Jameson’s primary response is one of bafflement and retreat. Reading through his essays on postmodernism, one realizes that in many respects “postmodernism” has come to replace “dialectic” as a favored theoretical term. Yet even more than its predecessor, “postmodernism” remains a word in search of a definition. Professor Jameson doesn’t provide one, and he knows it. Thus he describes the theory of postmodernism as an “effort to take the temperature of the age without instruments.”
On the one hand, in addition to declaring himself a “relatively enthusiastic consumer” of postmodern culture, Professor Jameson champions postmodernism as a source of new “energies” and cultural dynamism. On the other hand, he regards postmodernism as a synonym for “late capitalism,” “another systemic modification of capitalism.” “This whole global, yet American, postmodern culture,” he writes, “is the internal and super-structural expression of a whole new wave of American military and economic domination throughout the world: in this sense, as throughout class history, the underside of culture is blood, torture, death, and terror.” And yet he dismisses the modernist critique of postmodernism as a return to bourgeois individualism and “quaint romantic values” like genius: “woe to the country,” he writes in a moment of rare directness, “that needs geniuses, prophets, Great Writers, or demiurges!”

What is the alternative? Professor Jameson is too busy boning up on cyberpunk, MTV, and performance art to formulate a compelling response. In the end, *Postmodernism* may be said to represent Professor Jameson’s substitution of capitulation for an analysis of culture: he is fond of postmodern architecture and music, he confides, and “Food and fashion have also greatly improved, as has the life world generally.” Perhaps it is just that life in Durham, North Carolina, as the William A. Lane Professor of Comparative Literature is not so bad. In any event, one suspects that Professor Jameson’s seemingly insatiable appetite for intellectual novelty has finally given him a bad case of conceptual indigestion. What we are presented with in his new books is the spectacle of an intellectual whose longstanding commitment to gnostic pieties and fashionable politicized aestheticism has at last led him to abandon seriousness altogether.

Of course, it might simply be an instance of the dialectic inverting things. But one somehow doubts that in this instance Professor Jameson would be so quick to agree. As he noted in his book on Wyndham Lewis, the intellectual’s “private inner game of theoretical ‘convictions’ and polemics against imaginary conceptual antagonists and mythic counterpositions” can indeed have grim consequences in what he would surely disdain to call the real world. Perhaps it is a simple case of fatigue. Or maybe it is an illustration of Raymond Aron’s old point that Marxism is the opiate of the intellectuals.


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