

Review Article

History, Political Unconscious and the Symbolic in Jameson

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The present discussion is based on Jameson's *The Ideologies of Theory* appearing in two volumes (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1988. Vol.I- pp.212, Vol.II- pp.230). The first concerns itself with the situations of theory and the second with the problems of cultural and historical studies. These volumes, in fact, put together essays written by Jameson over a period of fifteen years from 1971 to 1986. Most of the ideas contained here are reworked, elaborated and given a more coherent shape in the longer works which intersperse the publication of these occasional papers.

In the general scepticism of the post-modern world the idea of fixed meaning and literary interpretation are consigned to a disreputable space. This kind of a situation had its seeds in the structuralist questioning of the substantialist thinking in general and their insistence on relational perceptions. Jameson has apparently similar views on the question. But his radicalism comes to the fore and his theoretical shift a little away from structuralist thought becomes clear in his definition of the process of criticism as a revealing of the content. In other words, Jameson and the structuralists reject interpretation for quite different reasons. Because for one content is self-evident and for the other it is non-existent. It is rather the positive and negative hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur that comes in handy for his purpose as weapons of restoring the original meaning and of demystifying the prevalent ideologies respectively. He tolerates the other ideas of interpretation insofar as they are metacommentaries, which remark on their own situation or which shift the attention back to history.

Metacommentary as a historicizing practice, in the opinion of Jameson, understands form as an expression of the inner logic of the content. This process could be revealed, he says, at the third semantic horizon in a metacommentary exercise. This semantic level with a historical dimension to it includes the other two. It deals with social change and the changing modes of production finding out complex ideological interplay at the level of form. The first is political in character which treats the text as a complex symbolic reaction, as a satirical pronouncement on the degraded society in the present, and it expresses a vision of society after the nostalgic image of a pre-capitalist one. The second is a social level which articulates the contradictions of society and identifies the corresponding ideologemes. Jameson elaborately deals with the three moments of the process of interpretation in *The Political Unconscious*, which contains most of his original thinking¹.

He in his *Ideologies of Theory*, with which we are chiefly concerned here, makes a historical survey of the transformations of capital and identifies their aesthetic modes. The cultural forms of realism, modernism and post-modernism, he says, go with market capitalism, imperialism and multi-national capitalism respectively. In the age of market capitalism the bourgeoisie had a tendency to naturalize history or transform culture into nature. This phenomenon finds expression in the attempt of realism to make meaning appear natural to give credibility to the story. In the age of Imperial power a critique of the system in modernism is disguised in tropes used to construct a utopian vision. Finally multinational capitalism with its multiculturalism leads to the death of the subject in the post-modern aesthetic domain.

Jameson's concept of history draws upon that of Althusser for whom history is a process without a *telos* or subject. But history, he thinks, is available to us only through its prior textualization and, therefore, is bound to be alienated by its representation. Because, the symbol with which it is sought to be represented has its zero degree only in case of animal language. Man has no choice but to think ideologically. Since history is inaccessible in its objectivity, the imaginary, which inhabits an intermediate space between the symbolic and the real and which is a pre-verbal register with a visual logic, acts as a substitute and has a tendency to absolutize itself as opposed to the particularized framework of the symbolic.

History being an absent cause for Jameson, truth is nothing but a part of a larger process of demystification, and Marxism with its metacommentary approach and its comprehensive method of analysis is the most suitable apparatus to employ while dealing with it. With the help of Marxist critical process, he believes, one ought to be able to reveal the hidden historical dimension of all formal pronouncements. Making a historical survey of literary devices and their mutations Jameson points out the fact of their transformations from ethical into political and historical categories.

Jameson's poetics of historiography is based on the premise that form and content are clearly separable entities. He draws upon Hayden White's table of structural relationships to drive home his point, and concludes that an apparently bizarre structural combination of a romantic emplotment, a conservative ideology and an ironic mode is possible in modern times which mark a multiplicity of cultural productions.

In the process of his attempt to chart a syntax of history Jameson makes an appraisal of the Weberian typology supposed to have a narrative undercurrent in spite of the latter's effort to emphasize the value-free character of Sociology as a discipline. Robert Nisbet's pronouncement on Weber as an artist in his *Sociology as an Art Form*² lends further credibility to Jameson's assessment of Weber, to which is linked the latter's replacement of the economic with the political category, his specific contribution to the anti-Marxist arguments. But Jameson makes it clear that Weber is only against the vulgar Marxist materialism. He invokes Weber to convince us that all the philosophical positions that insist on an immanent teleological movement in history must be

repudiated, and draws attention to an inextricable link between humanization of the world and a growing sense of the meaninglessness of life. He also stresses the mediatory role of the superstructure in Weber as well as Marx in regard to changes in the infrastructure suggesting that the ultimate source of meaning lies at the level of superstructure. For instance, protestantism performs the function of an intermediary and a valorizing agent in the transition from a feudal to a modern society.

Jameson hints at the material existence of the superstructural elements and seems to indict dialectical history with its prioritization of matter and its vision of a necessary failure and blood-guilt associated with the inevitable class struggle. But he admits at once the inseparability of such a vision from the historical position of realized socialism. He sees in Roland Barthe's use of the zero term a way out of the said blood-guilt or nightmare of history, which is a part of his attempt to assert the validity of the statements in utopian terms of the problems otherwise finding socialist formulations. Utopia is rather synonymous with socialism, he would insist, though historical materialism replaces utopian practice as an authentic mode of thinking, owing to the ahistorical vision of the latter.

But Harbermas thinks differently. He associates political reaction with anti-modernism and rehabilitates modernism as a vehicle of progressive utopian thought. Far from being indifferent to history and reality, modernism, he would argue, awakens reality only to neutralize it the next moment through its utopian obsession. It is a case of a transformation of ideology into utopia in modernism. In other words, an ideological critique of reality is at once metamorphosed into a dream of a rational domination of future. On the other hand the idolizing exercise in realism, according to the ideologues of modernism, is camouflaged in a universalizing discourse. Realism's preconceived notion of reality is what is objectionable to them. Thus, when they denounce realism they couch it in pre-aesthetic terms instead of in the aesthetic and cognitive style of the latter. The other view of realism, particularly that of Lukacs and Auerbach considers it a privileged mode of apprehending the world. This position on realism sees its parallel in the Sonata form in music and in the abolition of perspective in painting.

Jameson, for his part, finds both - the arguments for and against realism - completely ahistorical though equally convincing, and tries to put them in a historical perspective. He would prescribe himself a release from his own modernist cultural position and would exhort himself to assess modernism's relationship to the other cultural positions with the help of a larger supra-cultural paradigm. Lukacs, he thinks, is ahistorical in his failure to see the connection between realism and commerce and in his suggestion that a different social order such as communism would retain the same style of constructing reality as prevailed in the nineteenth century. Jameson makes it clear that secular and objective reality, the very materials that realism dealt with, are inextricably bound up with a particular stage of capitalism and have disappeared now, and that realism itself is now seen as one of many cultural forms. With the decline of

the bourgeoisie as a class along with the disintegration of collective vitality and destabilization of some common truth the concomitant cultural form that was realism ceased to be an appropriate mode of knowing the world. Jameson's stance on realism is different from that of the champions of modernism in that he, instead of falsifying the claims of realism unlike the latter, puts historical limits on them. He illustrates the point with the help of Deleuze and Guattari's notion of the famous historical triad of savagery, barbarism and civilization, originally formulated by Engels and Morgan. For Deleuze and Guattari, these stages of human history are characterized respectively by coding, overcoding and decoding of human life, of the primordial schizophrenic flux. The process of decoding is particularly associated with quantification and rationalization of capitalism and is at one with the demystifying mission of nineteenth century realism. They further draw attention to a process of recoding the flux through a return to the sacred and the mythical in modernism. Having taken a historical view of realism Jameson states that the realistic novel, even as it breaks the primitive signifiers, proves the provisional nature of secular reality as an object of the narrative process. He sounds ambiguous or rather paradoxical when he further remarks by way of rounding off the discussion of this problem that Lukacs in spite of his limitations may be ultimately correct in his pronouncements on modernism as something confirming the basic assumptions of realism but only driving them underground under the compulsions of a subjectivized world, compelling one to reacknowledge the validity of a secular reality in a time known for its tendency to abrogate it.

In his reflections on the Brecht - Lukacs debate Jameson's amphibious act makes it difficult to pin him down to a definite position. He thinks, both are correct in a way yet none wholly acceptable. He probably finds objectionable Lukacs' hostile views on modernism when he treats it as a cultural form disposed to avoid the social question³, asserting in his turn the significance of its repressed social content. He draws attention to Brecht's attack on Lukacs' slip into formalism and his incomplete grasp of the category of class struggle in a very dispassionate manner. But he is mildly critical of Lukacs' "formal mean between a modernistic subjectivism and an overly objectivist naturalism". On the other hand, he considers Brecht's concept of *verfremdung* or the estrangement effect of great relevance today, particularly for its potential to effect an exit from the *cul de sac* of agitational didacticism of the traditional revolutionary art. He refers to the tendency of Brechtian aesthetics to reassert the presence of the principle of play in realistic art against the insistence of Lukacs on its reflexive role. He would cap the discussion of Brecht-Lukacs debate with a suggestion that a new realism should do well to block the power of reification in modern society and at the same time to rediscover the lost totality. This new realism is also to integrate into its own system the most crucial aspect of modernism - its power to break automatism and to see reality in a new perspective.

Marxism and Historicism is an important area in the scholarship of Jameson. He asserts the finality of Marxism as a semantic horizon precisely because its

mastercode, he thinks, is an absent cause always resisting a full representation. Marxism, he affirms, demystifies the other frameworks and exposes their claim to being total systems of interpretation as false, rather than blot out their objects of study. He endorses Marxist analysis and is himself convinced that the other interpretive styles are subject to severe limitations as they wall themselves off from the social totality. Historicism is defined by Jameson first in a very simple fashion, as one's relationship to the past and one's chances of grasping its monuments. But he would like us to always remember that our approach to the past is invariably routed through the ideologies of the imaginary or through the political unconscious. On the contrary, the post-structuralist disapproval of historicism is indicated in their rejection of the genetic and teleological systems of thought. Teleology, a belief in a positive future, and genetic thought which projects it onto the past and sees that past as an evolutionary predecessor of an accomplished time of a historical nature are both disowned by post-structuralism on the strength of its synchronic thought. Jameson does not quarrel with synchronic thought so long as it stops short of repudiating history as an object of analysis. He even goes so far as asserting with Althusser that Marx's capital is a synchronic model and does not hesitate to admit that Darwin too is synchronic in the same sense.

Jameson persistently gives a call to historicize. His reading of existential historicism as a system of thought that defines history as a relationship between an individual subject living in the present with a cultural object of the past and his treatment of the same contact as that between two modes of production is in keeping with this habit of his. By this he refutes all those frameworks that vociferously argue in favour of a synchronic thinking, particularly those that tend to collapse all past and future into a perpetual present, which is a result of being locked in one's own reality. To this frame of mind of Jameson is related his revaluation of the Schizo as one with deep involvement in history, and his assertion of the latter's evolution from *Homo natura* to *Homo historia*. Ultimately he stresses the impact of time on the individual and restores to past its radical difference as a life form and its right to sit in judgment over the present

Jameson understands a specific period not as a common way of thinking but as one confronting the same objective situation. He acknowledges the diversity of responses to the shared moment with a rider that those responses are circumscribed by the inner structure of the moment. But what is the nature of the structural limit? How does it operate in the process of reality's mediation through the political unconscious? What is the nature of dialogue between the structure of reality and the ideology of the unconscious in the end product, that is the symbolic? These are some of the questions that are left unanswered.

However, with the said assumption Jameson tries to periodize the sixties on historical, political and economic basis looking for possibilities to establish parallel relations between the phenomena at the different levels. He points out the dissolution of the old concept of social class in the wake of the new "subjects of history" or "political categories" like the blacks, women, students and the third world subjects. In this

new situation the First world sixties appropriate Third-worldism as cultural and political models. The struggle of the marginal "subjects of history" to write back to the centre through a process of decolonization paradoxically goes together with neo-colonialism, an economic avatar of colonialism. For instance, the penetration of capital into the village structure through what is called green revolution, and into the unconscious in the form of culture industry, with which the last virgin space of life is colonized.

Coming to the cultural level, Jameson tries to relate the successive cultural forms to the social dynamics. He says, realism transformed itself into naturalism, which acted as the aesthetic form of mass culture. On the other hand, modernism, which evolved as a liberation from the hegemony of realism, the representational form peculiar to market capitalism, is in dialectical opposition to mass culture. The gradual easing of the opposition between the two and the convergence of the high and the mass cultural form fashion the post-modern moment. Most of the formal properties were already there in modernism, but they acquired a different significance in the position of a cultural dominant that they became in the post-modern situation.

Jameson links the transformations in the structure of sign to the cultural changes. High modernism, he insists, paves the way for a total auto-referentiality of the sign, the putative structuralist dictum. The reification accompanying capitalist flourishes of the time divorced the sign from its referent, creating an autonomous space for culture. Althusser's paradoxical idea of the semi-autonomous sphere of all culture marks again the turning point. For him, it is the ever present shadow of the social content that makes possible the autonomy of the cultural form, which means the new cultural space is no longer autonomous. In the post-modern social order, when the autonomous cultural sphere is a thing of the past, the free-floating sign or the culture itself drops down to the world and instead of disintegrating spreads over the whole area to engender a situation where culture is synonymous with social life.

Notes and References

- Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (London : Methuen, 1981), p. 76.
Robert Nisbet, *Sociology as an Art Form* (New York : Oxford UP, 1976), p.7.
Georg Lukacs, Tr. John and Necke Mander, *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* (London : Merlin Press, 1963), p.25.

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