

Realism After Postmodernism

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Fredric Jameson. *The Antinomies of Realism*. Verso, 2013. 313 pp.

In his 1977 “Afterword” to the volume *Aesthetics and Politics* Jameson observed that it was not only political history that was condemned to repeat the past but also literary history that experienced a certain “return of the repressed”:

Nowhere has this return of the repressed been more dramatic than in the aesthetic conflict between “Realism” and “Modernism”, whose navigation and renegotiation is still unavoidable for us today, even though we may feel that each position is in some sense right and yet neither is any longer wholly acceptable. (1977, 196)

For Jameson, at that time, it was paradoxically realism that offered the possibility of a new political aesthetic, as modernism’s aesthetics of fragmentation and estrangement had become irredeemably reconciled to the logic of the market and consumer capitalism. The renegotiation of realism and modernism was put on hold for the next two decades, however, as Jameson emerged as the most prominent Marxist theorist of postmodernism. Since the late 1990s Jameson has made a welcome, to some of us at least, return to the question of modernism and modernity with a series of works: *Brecht and Method* (1998), *A Singular Modernity* (2002) and the collected volume *The Modernist Papers* (2007). With *The Antinomies of Realism* we finally return to that long deferred renegotiation of realism but, as we will see below, against a background of the eclipse of modernism by full-blown postmodernism.

The Antinomies of Realism constitutes the third volume of Jameson’s sequence *The Poetics of Social Forms*, a literary project that is surely without comparison today. The sequence has a projected six volumes of which four have been published to date: *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of late Capitalism* (1991); *Archaeologies of the Future* (2005); *The Modernist Papers* (2007); while *A Singular Modernity* (2002) provides “the theoretical section of the antepenultimate volume” and a footnote in the book on Hegel’s phenomenology promises that volume two will be on allegory, entitled *Overture: The Harmonics of Allegory* (2010a, 126, n. 41). As Sara Danius describes it, *The Poetics of Social Forms* attempts to “provide a general history of aesthetic forms, at the same time seeking to show how this history can be read in tandem with a history of social and economic formations.” As always with Jameson, it is the form

that is historical rather than the content. *The Antinomies of Realism* reads realism in terms of shifting temporalities, as an evolutionary process in which its positive and negative aspects are inextricably tied together. In a sense Jameson's realism is akin to Lacan's *objet petit a* (1977 [1973]), that paradoxical object cause of desire that we are constantly searching for but can never possess, for as soon as we believe we possess it, it slips from our grasp. The temporality of *objet a*, therefore, is characterized by a paradoxical sense of anticipation and loss, we can never grasp the thing itself, it is always anticipated in the future or missed in the past. As Jameson puts it in relation to realism:

It is as though the object of our meditation began to wobble, and the attention to it to slip insensibly away from it in two opposite directions, so that at length we find we are thinking, not about realism, but about its emergence; not about the thing itself, but about its dissolution. (2013, 1)

Thus, Jameson's approach to realism will not follow any of the traditional approaches to the problem. He quickly runs through Auerbach, Bakhtin, Lukács and Sartre (2013, 1-5) only to inform us that he will not follow any of these directions, but will address the issue dialectically.¹ It is in this sense that Jameson will historicize realism, insofar as history and the dialectic are at one with each other, and history "can only be the problem of which it claims to be its own solution" (6).

Approaching realism through temporality and what he sees as the twin sources of realism, the narrative impulse and affective investment, Jameson generates a startlingly original reading of realism. As the narrative impulse is clearly older than the realist novel, a modern but not modernist form, Jameson locates this particular impulse in the tale and storytelling, or *récit*, and this introduces the first complexity into our sense of temporality. Storytelling is based on a notion of irrevocability, or an unheard-of event that becomes memorable and worthy of retelling over and over again and, as Walter Benjamin taught us some time ago, what binds such events together is the experience of death. Storytelling, for Benjamin, is not so much biography as obituary, as the event has always-already happened and is in the past, hence the centrality of death to the novel (1968 [1936]). The temporality of this irrevocable but memorable event is thus redefined in the story as 'what cannot be changed, what lies beyond the reach of repetition or rectification, which now comes to be seen as the time of everyday life of routine' (2013, 19). Affect, on the other hand, points us towards not the past but the present; to speak of affect, observes Jameson, is to speak of the body or

¹ Although, as David Cunningham (2014) notes, *The Antinomies of Realism* does carry on a subterranean dialogue with Lukács, in particular the essay "Narrate or Describe?" (1970), as Jameson seeks to redeem Zola from Lukács' critique.

the postmodern “reduction to the body” and its specific temporality of a “perpetual present.” The discussion of the narrative impulse, death and affective investment in the first two chapters of *The Antinomies* resonates with Peter Brooks’ Freudian inflected model of narrative in *Reading for the Plot* (1984), especially with Brooks’ interest in nineteenth century literature, but as we will see below Jameson steers away from the psychoanalytic perspective. In short, Jameson approaches realism as a paradox or aporia, a literary form constantly struggling with its own conditions of possibility to narrate the past and its dissolution in the literary representation of affect in a perpetual present. It is this historically new realm of affect that creates the irreconcilable tension of realism; as Jameson notes, “to resolve the opposition either way would destroy it” (26).

Affect is a notoriously slippery term. Within psychoanalysis affect is sometimes taken as simply a synonym for feelings or emotions (see Rycroft, 1968, 3) and, at other times, affect is carefully distinguished from both (Johnston and Malabou, 2013, xvii). For Catherine Malabou, affect is generally speaking a modification, that is to say, the result of “the impact of an encounter, be it with another subject or an object” (2013, 5). Jameson is not using the term in a strictly psychoanalytic sense, however, and his own discussion of affect is restricted to questions of representation and literary history, that is to say, the representation of different forms of affect and their impact on realist narratives. He does distinguish between affect (feelings) and emotion or “named emotion,” as he terms it, to register the impact of language and the fact that emotions are conscious states insofar as “the nomination of an experience makes it viable at the very moment that it transforms and reifies it” (2013, 34). On the other hand:

affects or feelings which have not thus been named are not available to consciousness, or are absorbed into subjectivity in different ways that render them inconspicuous and indistinguishable from the named emotion they may serve to fill out and to which they lend body and substance. (34)

But he does not go further into the technicalities of affect or the controversy around whether or not one can meaningfully speak of “unconscious affects.” In contrast to named emotions, affect does not “mean” anything. What is important for Jameson is affect’s relationship to the body and the possibilities of its combination with the longer-range forms of temporality of storytelling, *récit* and destiny (46). Thus, for example, Zola’s novels offer us immense accumulations of bodies in movement across space, where the sheer overload of sensations and intensities inscribed on these bodies intersects with the pseudo-scientific notion of “tainted heredity” as a unique form of temporality. History intersects with personal histories in the sheer excess of “bodies in full effervescence, paralysis or decay” as affect thus becomes “a symptomatology

reinforcing the great realist project at the very moment it imperils it" (76).

The Antinomies is such a wide ranging book that it is difficult to capture its sheer breadth in a short review. In the first half of the book Jameson focuses on the twin sources of realism, analyzing the formal function of happiness in Tolstoy and *mauvaise foi* in George Eliot. He moves from an analysis of plot in Zola to character systems and the waning of "protagonicity" in Pérez Gladós (that is to say, even the protagonists of Gladós are essentially minor characters, as the historical conditions slowly render individualism meaningless), the role of the villain in Eliot to problems of genre and the function of pronouns in Flaubert and Henry James. Jameson's own narrative arches from the emergence of realism in the tale and récit to its dissolution in modernism's "uncontrolled linguistic production" (187) in the works of Joyce, Woolf and Henry James. It concludes with a brief coda on the sundering of narrative and affect in the, perhaps, anachronistic work of Alexander Kluge. I must admit that at times I was not sure affect was the right word to describe what Jameson was talking about here, which was often much more to do with the transformation of bodies and subjectivities than affects as such.

Part two of *The Antinomies* shifts the focus from specific authors to more general issues of form. "Experiments of Time" addresses issues of salvation, providence and destiny. "War and Representation" concludes that war is fundamentally unrepresentable and virtually non-narrative today. The long concluding chapter "The Historical Novel Today" draws together many of the preceding discussions arguing that the popularity of the historical novel today must be grasped as a symptom or symbolic compensation for the decline of historical consciousness itself. Jameson does not cite specific examples here but refers to "Harlequin histories" or romantic tales set against this or that costume setting; the attempt to reconstruct historical situations in which "real" historical figures made some fateful decision; and finally, the attempt to capture the "feel" of some great event through the eyes of an imaginary character. In other words, he identifies the very kind of postmodern historicism and pastiche that we are familiar with from his long standing concern for the loss of historicity in the era of postmodernity. This shopping list of potential responses to the progressive impossibility of the historical novel in the Twentieth century thus underlines Jameson's long standing concern for the loss of the historical referent and its dissolution in the globalized economy of the image. Paradoxically, then, the historical novel is an impossible form or genre that is still massively practised and hugely popular. How, asks Jameson, can we account for this when the conditions of possibility of such a form, the nation state, have declined? The answer to this lies in the fact that the "true historical novel, today, is not the historical novel at all but rather realism as such" (262). Hilary Mantel stands in for the contemporary historical novel and her huge popularity certainly attests to its continuing cultural centrality. If Mantel provides us

with a model of the historical novel today what is the future for this impossible form? Here we shift to familiar Jameson territory. As Jameson writes, “the historical novel of the future (which is to say of our own present) will necessarily be science-fictional inasmuch as it will have to include questions about the fate of our social system” (298). The examples Jameson provides here are drawn from film, in particular Christopher Nolan’s *Inception* (2010), but the appearance of film and mass culture at the end of this discussion of the historical novel raises an issue that he does not explore here. Surely the best examples of the persistence of realism in our culture today are to be found on television. I am not thinking here of reality TV as such but of those magnificent series that have been produced by US commercial television in the past two decades such as *The Wire*, *Breaking Bad* and *Deadwood*. This would surely have been the place to bring in these contemporary forms of realism, not least because Jameson himself has written so insightfully about them in the past (2010b).

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