

GUEST COLUMN

The Name of Metacommentary: Fredric Jameson

ANDREW COLE

He made suggestions. We
Carried them out.

—Bertolt Brecht

It's 1996, and I'm standing under a red awning on which is printed in faded white lettering, its drop shadowing barely visible, "BAHN'S CUISINE: VIETNAMESE AND CHINESE FOOD." This is a local favorite in Durham, North Carolina, and I'm peering in the windows for any crowd, because it's the weekend and everyone piles in for the "Saturday Special" or number eight on the dry-erase board. Good, I have the place all to myself, I mutter as I enter. No sooner do I pay for my lunch and find a table than, okay, Fredric Jameson walks in. It's just us here. He smiles, and we exchange pleasantries—probably something about showing up early for the special or trying the kung pao. You see, we know each other well enough and had already chatted during the break in Thursday's seminar. It's the weekend. Our business is Bahn's, so I get back to my lunch, in no rush to finish. Never trying to catch his eye for a nod goodbye, I slip out. That's it. That's the story.

The sensation I mean to convey here is the comfort of just having Fred around, right over there enjoying lunch at Bahn's, or imagining that he's at the farm up I-85 faxing back correx at 5:47 a.m., or somewhere in Connecticut clacking away on his typewriter. Is there a German word for the contentment of knowing that someone like Fred is simply . . . around? There needs to be, for the feeling is hard to explain, though I reckon it involves the duality of experiencing the unassuming Fred in person while realizing he's also a certain "Jameson." The fabled signified strikes back (s/S), this time reversing position and pressing down on the signifier on the logic that Fred

ANDREW COLE is Woodrow Wilson Professor of Literature in the Department of English at Princeton University.

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was so extremely kind that you gave no thought to the fact that he was *the* “Fredric Jameson.”

Fred Jameson is no longer here. But he is still very much around in that he’s someone we mourn and remember, yes, but whom we will think about for as long as there is still thinking to be done. His massive contributions to scholarship of every kind in most every discipline amount to a singularly felt presence you’d have to be in a float tank not to sense. The beauty of his long life is that he could write about numerous emergent circumstances and witness new areas of thought and practice coming into being, offering a critical perspective on what everyone is experiencing in the real time of history. Every reader of his learned something new from his work, and every venue in which he published was elevated accordingly.

It would be a worthwhile exercise to track his work across any of the journals where he published regularly throughout the years—in *New Left Review*, for instance, and especially in *Social Text*, which he founded with Stanley Aronowitz and John Brenkman in 1979. Truthfully, any selection of essays by Jameson can be viewed as a consistent expression of his ideas and approach, but it so happens that his paper titled “Metacommentary,” appearing in *PMLA* in 1971, is one of the most important articles about method in his entire oeuvre.¹ After all, it’s not for nothing that Jameson, in 2008, wrote that “I remain committed to the perspective of the earliest of these essays, ‘Metacommentary’” (*Ideologies* x). On this point, he never wavered. In what follows I use this early essay as a point of entry into some of the main currents of thought running through his writings in general. A number of critical terms originated in or circuited through Jameson’s work—the ideologue, transcoding, cognitive mapping, the political unconscious, pastiche, “difference relates,” the “waning of affect”—but metacommentary is the most creative and critically capacious of all these, I believe, and, accordingly, the most distinctively Jamesonian and perhaps the most important for the future of criticism.

Toward Marxist Interpretation

Beneath this curious word, *metacommentary*, lies the entire hermeneutic that was to unfold in the final chapter of *Marxism and Form* (1971) and again in *The Political Unconscious* (1981), with iterations across every single book to follow, including what’s due to be released in the near term. I mean not to identify what’s unwavering about Jameson’s method from his earliest to his latest works but rather to explore what’s incontestable about his approach, recognizing that the names we now have for his interpretive practices, whether “dialectical,” “Always historicize!,” “Marxist,” or something else, don’t begin to capture the power and persuasion of his *thinking*, persistently in the mode of this thing he dubbed “metacommentary.”

Jameson begins “Metacommentary” with some fundamentals about the experience of interpreting works like Gertrude Stein’s *Tender Buttons* and Stéphane Mallarmé’s sonnets, in which there is a certain “will to be *uninterpretable*” (10). Reading one of these works, you start to shift in your chair. Feeling puzzled, you look out the window, wondering if you should stick with the blasted text. Stein is up to something. But what? This is the moment you discover you have nothing to say about works that don’t welcome you in.

An episode like this isn’t a scene of reading but rather of *thinking*—the self-conscious thought, the awareness of the need for new concepts for understanding what you feel unprepared to interpret. And there lies the move that is metacommentary, the leap of no tiger: first reading, then the thought of reading, next the “commentary” on what just transpired. To wit, as Jameson says, “every individual interpretation must include an interpretation of its own existence, must show its own credentials and justify itself: every commentary must be at the same time a metacommentary as well. Thus genuine interpretation directs the attention back to history itself, and to the historical situation of the commentator as well as of the work” (10).

Even that move seems too quick, though. So let me slow it down. What I take from “Metacommentary” is

the notion that interpretation qua interpretation cannot help wander into different dimensions, straying out of sheer curiosity into contemporary arts and practices that remind you of the work in hand. You envision perhaps the audience members in the salon making perfect sense of Stein as they zone out to her collection of modernist paintings *aider à l'interprétation*; or you wonder why there is even a “Stein” at all at this *and* that moment in time, and why this book is in your hands today. Interpretation, that is, will not be constrained by the vise of some ism or named protocol that polices the lanes in which such interpretation refuses to stay. By its own motion and interest, metacommentary will soon enough open out onto “the historical situation of the commentator,” in which case you pause to consider just where you’re doing your thinking from. Eventually, and still in steps, you arrive at Marxist hermeneutics, which involves all these questions and many more.

That is Jameson’s argument, just as his own essay about metacommentary wends its way, finally, into the possibilities of conceptualizing “collective life,” “a more humane collectivity and social organization” (17), without naming these concerns “Marxist.”² Indeed, that Jameson didn’t name this ism at the end of his essay seems to confirm what we learn from his later work: “metacommentary” is similar to, but not quite identical with, the avowed “Marxian interpretive framework” detailed at the beginning of *The Political Unconscious* (10; see 29–34) involving the four “levels” of allegorical interpretation through which a reader moves. Accordingly, compare how Jameson poses the question of “Metacommentary”—“Why does the work require interpretation in the first place?” (15)—to his later query in *The Political Unconscious*:

Our business as readers and critics of culture is . . . to ask ourselves why we should be expected to assume, in the midst of capitalism, that the aesthetic rehearsal of the problematics of a social value from a quite different mode of production—that feudal ideology of honor—should need no justification and should be expected to be of interest to us. (217; see 101, 260)³

In this way, metacommentary is the work-up to any Marxist reading whose protocols involve, in the long run, the matter of modes of production. With metacommentary, it’s the questions and the thinking, not the answers or problematics in advance, that get you to where committed criticism needs to be. It’s what got Jameson there, too.⁴ Accordingly, metacommentary teaches us that Jameson’s later dictum to “Always historicize!” (*Political Unconscious* 9) is simply an epitome of this free interpretive movement, not a declaration to interpret one way only and “always”—which is precisely why Jameson indicates that his “imperative” is a *process* and will “turn out to be the moral of *The Political Unconscious*” (9; my emphasis).

That metacommentary is the very beginning of socially meaningful criticism is reflected in Jameson’s remarks in an interview that such an interpretive method starts in the undergraduate classroom. Apologies, but it’s really worth quoting the pedagogical Jameson at length to get eyes on these words:

[I]n undergraduate work one does not really confront the “text” at all, one’s primary object of work is the *interpretation* of the text, and it is about interpretations that the pedagogical struggle in undergraduate teaching must turn. The presupposition here is that undergraduates—as more naive or unreflexive readers (which the rest of us are *also* much of the time)—never confront a text in all its material freshness; rather, they bring to it a whole set of previously acquired and culturally sanctioned interpretive schemes, of which they are unaware, and through which they read the texts that are proposed to them. This is not a particularly individual matter, and it does not make much difference whether one locates such interpretive stereotypes in the mind of the student, in the general cultural atmosphere, or on the text itself, as a sedimentation of its previous readings and its accumulated institutional interpretations: the task is to make those interpretations visible, as an object, as an obstacle rather than a transparency, and thereby to encourage the student’s self-consciousness as to the operative power of such unwitting schemes, which our tradition calls *ideologies*. The student’s first confrontation

with a classic, therefore—with *Heart of Darkness*, with Jane Austen, with Vonnegut or with Hemingway—will never really involve unmediated contact with the object itself, but only an illusion of contact, whose terminus turns out to be a whole range of interpretive options, from the existential one (the absurdity of the human condition), across myth criticism and its more psychological form (the integration of the Self) all the way to ethics (choices and values, the maturing of the protagonist, the apprenticeship of good and evil). These various liberal ideologies (and they obviously do not exhaust the field) all find their functional utility in the repression of the social and the historical, and in the perpetuation of some timeless and ahistorical view of human life and social relations. To challenge them is therefore a political act of some productiveness. (Interview 73)

Jameson needn't label what he describes here. That's because his remarks are no doubt formulated in the name of metacommentary itself while also seeming to describe exactly the situation in a classroom composed of readers experiencing literature for the first time who are usually ready in one way or another to interpret, even if (today) it's with notions they encounter on social media.

Literature/History in Real Time

Those fortunate enough to teach and write literary criticism will still wonder, however, whether metacommentary is basically a variety of Literature/History, which bids you sit with your Dickens and thumb through the encyclopedia of Victorian England for reading comprehension. Such clarification on this point is necessary insofar as Jameson's "Always historicize!" shared discursive and institutional space with New Historicism in the early 1980s, as a consequence of which the method of *The Political Unconscious* was taken to be just another exercise in Literature/History. It's not that at all, or rather it is but only in the way that the strigiform is also a eukaryote. Even so, in the later essay "Marxist Criticism and Hegel," Jameson explicitly addresses the study of "texts in context," fessing up to a certain awkwardness: as "the critic passes from text to context," the move

"can rarely be managed gracefully" (432). This, he repeats, is "the embarrassing weak link of the move from text to context."⁵ Jameson parodies the practice:

Indeed, as far as Marxist literary criticism is concerned, I think it can generally be agreed that its most embarrassing move tends to be this (unavoidable) shifting of gears in which we pass from literary analysis to Marxian interpretation and find ourselves obliged to evoke the social and political meaning of the text in terms of the classes, historical contradictions, political and economic background, the conjunctures of forces and ideologies, capitalist alienation, commodification, and ideological occultation and repression, all of which lurk behind the aesthetic curtain and are suddenly unveiled in all their impoverished extraliterary nakedness like the wizard of Oz. (432)

One response to this vignette is that it by no means describes Jameson's own interpretive activity, even if he's speaking in the royal "we" only to proclaim that "I myself have sometimes sinned in this direction as well, with the scantiest of references to 'commodification' or 'finance capital'" (432). Sure, we can entertain the conceit that Jameson is the Toto who, with the slobbery tug of a curtain, demystifies appearances for what they are, but we should be honest about his work and remember that he invariably checked himself first and foremost, always poised to perform metacommentary about procedures taken to be adjacent to his own hermeneutic, which—in its capaciousness—he inevitably includes in moments of self-criticism.

Metacommentary isn't Marxist lit-crit according to a manual or for that matter a little red book. Instead, what directs you to Marxist reading is the movement of interpretation. It is on the final approach of this movement, that near arrival to conceptualizing collective life, that the interpreter can decide to divert from the method, as well as fly from reality, and instead land safely at a formalism of one kind or another, at which point interpretation, for Jameson, "stops short."⁶ Metacommentary, for those who go all the way, ensures an embroidered, intellectually energized,

and contemporaneously urgent mode of historical analysis.

We still, though, have this matter of History standing before us in majestic majuscule. And for Jameson, as we saw above, metacommentary means to direct “attention back to history itself.” What might that entail, though, if not the taking of Literature/History for a spin? The first interpretive move in metacommentary is historical precisely in the formulation of the thoughtfully counterintuitive question, “Why does the work require interpretation in the first place?” (15). A question like this enables readers to “think our way back into a situation” (Jameson, “War and Representation” 1544), back to the emergence of the object in real time, with the understanding that such a work really needn’t *be* at all, yet here it is. So we think a work’s qualities in a freshly estranged way that’s less retrospection and more propection, a looking forward from the past where we see a future unfold. This thought, also a movement, is no less “interpretive” than looking backward from the present in a contextualizing maneuver, but it’s arguably a better way to direct “attention back to history”—as Jameson describes the method in “Marxist Criticism and Hegel,” along with some inside baseball:

The idea is that, following a number of logical preconditions for the work back in time, we lay in place what had already to be—socially, historically, formally, existentially, or psychologically—before reconstructing the actual production of the thing itself its emergence into Existence and its Appearance, its reception and meaning for Actuality (another fundamental Hegelian category). (437)

What had “to be” for a work to show up the way it does? You can’t answer without entering the historical frame and thinking the preconditions of a historical present in which something is created, “its emergence into Existence and its Appearance.”⁷ (The Marxist emphasis on “literary production” goes right to this issue of emergence and isn’t a facile way of equating writing with road repair.)

However, Jameson’s best example of this technique of propection remains the one in *Marxism and Form*:

[W]e must try to bring a new unfamiliarity to some of the social phenomena we are accustomed to take for granted: to stare, for instance, with the eyes of a foreigner at the row upon row of people in formal clothing, seated without stirring within their armchairs, each seemingly without contact with his neighbors, yet at the same time strangely divorced from any immediate visual spectacle, the eyes occasionally closed as in powerful concentration, occasionally scanning with idle distraction the distant cornices of the hall itself. For such a spectator it is not at once clear that there is any meaningful relationship between this peculiar behavior and the bewildering tissue of instrumental noises that seems to provide a kind of background for it.

(12)

Here Jameson unconventionally sets a scene, never naming the place or building we’re meant to study, and instead conveys sense experience in real time; the sentences add up to a concertgoer’s first visit to a public orchestra hall in the eighteenth century when there were no such venues previously, or at least none that weren’t a periwig’s small palace court or a room in a grody pub. This is an example of how to “think our way back into a situation”—with the Sartrean resonance of “situation” and the “projects” or futurities therein duly noted.

We should dwell longer in *Becoming*—that is, tarry at a place where the metacommentary of 1971 wasn’t yet the “Always historicize!” of 1981. It is true that Jameson repeatedly names metacommentary in the pages of *The Political Unconscious*. But as he understood the method ten years prior, metacommentary issues from what’s already historical about our own sense of what a novel does to us, the way “the sentences of the individual work” stir within us a “global feeling of a vision of life of some kind” (“Metacommentary” 12). I dare say that this disavowed historicity, this entry-level political unconscious, is why we read novels in the first place; we roam in a fictive space where “historical” aliveness is “the literary.” Other genres move us in

other ways, but in the novel we feel something fully, such that we experience the novel as a world enough, a totality unto its own and, for that reason, immersive. We usually love that sensation of worldly depth when reading; we chase the “heightened excitement,” as Jameson calls it in “Criticism and Categories.”⁸

In “Metacommentary,” then, Jameson finds this impression of “completeness” to be “immanent” to the novel, but it’s a feeling that’s transformed into a thought, to the extent that anyone thinks about their feelings at all, which is everyone reading this, I wager: “the novel . . . persuades us in concrete fashion that human action, human life, is somehow a complete, interlocking whole, a single, formed, meaningful substance. In the long run, of course, the source of this lived unity lies not in metaphysics or religion, but in society itself” (12).⁹ There is no ism here, still, but the word *society* seems suspicious enough to cause worry that a lovely piece of literature will get a context or, *quelle horreur*, be subject to critique. But fret no more, because “society itself” is intelligible to us only in *us*, as “lived experience,” which is crucially for Jameson “nothing more nor less than the very components of our concrete social life: words, thoughts, objects, desires, people, places, activities” (16). That’s everything, no? A critic can either fuss about these terms like a sidewalk superintendent, or add variations on these very broad themes in view of subdisciplines that really matter.

So much is already there in “Metacommentary”: totality, the collective and its “destinies,” synchrony, diachrony, ideology, allegory, science fiction, levels of interpretation, work, and Marx—all of which we recognize in later Jameson. And it’s from this signal essay that I would recommend reading Jameson’s other works. For example, “*La Cousine Bette* and Allegorical Realism” is overtly paired with “Metacommentary,” not only in the way it appears in the very next quarterly issue of *PMLA* in 1971, but because Jameson’s epigraph in this second installment is drawn from his own words in the previous essay (“Metacommentary” 13). Granted, everyone cites themselves eventually, but I’ve not seen a scholar do *this* before. But Jameson gets a pass, if

for no other reason than the epigraph stands as a methodological statement to say that what follows in “*La Cousine Bette* and Allegorical Realism” is itself metacommentary.

In his reading of Honoré de Balzac’s *La Cousine Bette*, Jameson thinks inside the work, attuned to the larger problems of plot—as well as the countercurrents that are textual logics unknown to the author—both of which well up from the individual Balzacian sentence in all its bloviation. In other words, Jameson’s interpretive moves are governed by the work itself. He finds analogies between Balzac’s novel and Marxist writing—for example, “Balzac’s description has a social dimension as well, indeed it is very close to the kind of Marxist psychology practiced by Georg Lukács” (“*La Cousine Bette*” 250). And he shifts between various interpretive paradigms that have “local validity” at different points in the novel itself.¹⁰ For example, Jameson thinks within a “psychoanalytic model” (253; see 247), largely in Freudian or even Freudo-Marxist terms; his time at the University of California, San Diego, overlapped with Herbert Marcuse’s, and Marcuse was the primary exponent of Freudo-Marxism, so this move makes extra sense (see 249, 254n19). At other moments in the essay, he declares his interpretation to be “a phenomenological description of a complex of feelings immanent to the work itself” (247), and then later names his interpretation “*constructivistic*” (250)—coining a barbarism so as not to be aligned with the civilized Constructivists—and then once more he calls his thinking “allegorical” (252). Jameson even dramatizes this naming practice with some pronounced enthusiasm:

Hatred against desire! Death against life! Now, it seems to me, we are in a position to interpret the two-part symmetry of the novel demonstrated in the first part of this essay, and to give a name to the impersonal forces that seem to confront each other beneath the realistic surface of the work, which little by little organizes itself into the struggle between the life and death instincts themselves, between what Freud called Eros and Thanatos.

(249)

Bam! bang! followed by a conjunctive adverb backstepping into the neat hedges of the passive voice. By such naming, by each reveal, Jameson isn't attempting to be ecumenical or syncretic so much as working through levels of interpretation called out by the text itself.¹¹ Above all he is giving a name to his thought processes, critically aware that such naming keeps in motion, rather than fixes, the interpreter's reflexivity, just in the way, too, the lowly referent asks after the suitability or, better, adequacy of its royal reference—with the consequence of putting the reader in mind of this same tension.¹²

The Origins of a Style

I'd like to think that this movement of thought, these moments of metacommentary, propel Jameson into a style of his own, indeed a style to which the descriptors *dialectical*, *Jamesonian*, and even *metacommentary* could be applied. In point of fact, in his very first book from 1961, Jameson describes style as if it were already the topic of metacommentary (as yet unnamed). For him, the reader recognizes style as a distinctively "elevated language" characteristic of this or that author (*Sartre* vii), but then realizes that these stylizations and even the finished product that is the "book" is all an "act"—not a put-on but rather "an act among many other different kinds of acts in the development of a human life, and the purely literary style begins to lose its privileged status and be confounded with the style of a life" (ix). It's tempting to view his explanation of style as proto-metacommentary seeing how private reading opens up to this larger thing called "life." In other words, if this process looks like metacommentary, it's because Jameson shows a real curiosity about where interpretation goes after it begins.

It's inevitable, then, that the readerly encounter with style and "a special kind of awakened attention on our part" (xi) would be conceptually productive: "[o]ur unwatched reading mind, with its spontaneous attentions and lapses . . . provides, in what it notices and what excites it, the material out of which intrinsic categories evolve" (x). That word, *categories*, always in Jameson signals a conceptual

insight on his part, as evident in his latest pieces like "Criticism and Categories" (2022) with its concluding provocation about a seemingly Kantian conceptuality that composes "a true political unconscious" (566). Perhaps Jameson's best demonstration of a method attentive to the interaction of style and concept appears in his magisterial *Postmodernism; or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991). For the record, Jameson suggests that his book "is not to be read as stylistic description, as the account of one cultural style or movement among others" (3), affirming what he says pages later that the "conception of postmodernism outlined here is a historical rather than a merely stylistic one" (45). But his book is quite precisely an assemblage of long stylistic expositions of a great variety of media so as to grasp the "concept" that is postmodernism. He is thus reading style but not in the name of stylistics but in the interest of dialectics, which seeks to grasp that greater concept in motion in history, as the first sentence of this book advises: "[i]t is safest to grasp the concept of the postmodern as an attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place" (ix; see xiii). And soon we learn that it's the concept that contains, in the end, the styles while itself not a style but something else—a "cultural dominant": "it seems to me essential to grasp postmodernism not as a style but rather as a cultural dominant: a *conception* which allows for the presence and coexistence of a range of very different, yet subordinate, features" (4; my emphasis). We can therefore understand Jameson's negation of *style*, and all the "not" operators sticking to that one word, to be complicit in a dialectical reversal, because without style, there'd simply be no concept, no historical interpretation, and no voluminous account of postmodernism.

You can track Jameson's interest in the heightening of awareness of style from *Marxism and Form* (8, 170, 194, 245, 403, 414) to *The Prison-House of Language* (xi, 150, 169), and on to his later works like *Postmodernism*—all in a manner consistent with his first book on Sartre. Two other examples should suffice, however, to help us make a larger

claim about Marxist literary criticism after Jameson. First, for Jameson in *Brecht and Method* (1998), a properly dialectical “method” asks readers to “heighten stylistic analysis” so that “an interpretation emerges which shifts gears and at once repositions us on a different level” that “transcends the merely linguistic or verbal” (21). By this process, we gain insight into Brechtian “storytelling,” which exhibits a turn of phrase, a gesture, a *gestus* that whip up the “thought” of “daily life in general” (27)—quite nearly Jameson’s thesis on style in his book on Sartre (though he cares to contrast Brecht and Sartre [see 56, 172]). Second—and this one won’t surprise—Jameson grounds this entire method in Marx, as we see in his *Representing Capital* (2011), in which he observes a certain “modulation into the figurative which is as always the sign that Marx’s text has risen to a certain consciousness of itself, has reached a height from which for a moment it can look out across the totality of its object and of the system as a whole” (68). The moment Marx “acts” to stylize his own writing—to boot, all up in a tizzy shouting “Accumulate, accumulate! That is Moses and the prophets!” (qtd. on 67)—is precisely when greater analytic categories come into play that rise above any one stylized sentence and prompt Marx himself to hazard a conceptual insight to the totality of his interventions.

All these examples across the decades—and there are yet others—embolden me to propose that for Marxist literary criticism style is the more significant topic, arguably the better critical word, than form, insofar as style indexes those conceptual practices that matter most to critical theory, namely, dialectical thought, the writing of dialectical sentences, and the practice of “Marxist stylistics” (*Marxism and Form* 397; see xii, 53).¹³ To be sure, it’s for the sake of such stylistics that Jameson, I believe, writes the way he does and produces so many memorable passages. Behold his flight of thinking in “War and Representation” (2009):

Everything here—from the penniless imperial court, which counts on Wallenstein to raise forces for it at the same time that it tries to give him orders, down

to the brutal *soldateska* who live off the countryside—has to do with money and with an immense coral polyp that refuses to starve or die away but keeps itself alive for unforeseeable years by the very strength with which it draws money out of its hiding place, like magnets drawing, or blood from a stone, soaking it up interminably, reproducing itself, using its population of generals, peasants, priests, burghers, kings, lepers, the landless, heiresses, as so many divining rods, so many instruments for draining the last drops of wealth from the devastated land. Wealth then becomes the conduit of energy, whether blood, sexuality and libido, activity, irritability, sensation, impulse, drive, propulsion; it is what makes the sentences pound forward like horses’ hooves as well as the human individuals themselves to their otherwise incomprehensible yet irrepressible heat-seeking dashes. (1540)

Suddenly, we’re in *Blood Meridian*’s hellscape, but worse. Sure, there are other intensifying passages in Jameson’s writing, even in this essay,¹⁴ but there’s no doubt that Jameson is in overdrive here. And given that he conscientiously involves “sentences” with the scene itself—as if to focus on, yet see through, the very medium of style—we can thus be permitted to observe that what Jameson says of Marx can be said of himself concerning a certain stylistic “modulation into the figurative.”

Quite literally, in fact: for in *Archaeologies of the Future* Jameson at once practices this style by thematizing the highest perspective there could possibly be:

Galactic visuality is one of the earliest human aesthetics, extending back in time well before its formalization in the zodiac and constellations. In a beautiful passage of *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno singles out fireworks as the very prototype of art’s temporality, its fleeting existence as sheer apparition, a dazzling that fades out of being. The stars in the night sky are just such an apparition suspended in time, a multiplicity stretched immobile across space, whose other face is that firmament as the scroll of which Apocalypse tells us that it will be rolled up in the last days. The first forms of perception and articulation impose themselves as the

staring light of the planets, the slow separation from each other of those lights from the wheeling rise and fall of the thronged numbers behind them. What defines this perception, however, is a reversal of vision in which it is the stars that look down on us and hold us in their blinding field of vision. This is the fear so uncannily represented by Asimov, that as individuals and as a whole living species we are caught and immobilized in this remorseless gaze of the heavens, very much in the spirit of Sartre and Lacan. It is a primal terror quite unlike the effect of the moon, whose presence is a Utopian promise, as in Le Guin's *Dispossessed* where the orb of Urras means indescribably human and natural richness to the settlers of Anarres, on which on the contrary the lonely emissary gazes with longing and nostalgia. (94–95)

This heightening of thought consequent with an evident figurative modulation reflects the bi-level of style—that is, style as the entire movement of sentences for which no single idiosyncratic sentence stands as an emblem, such that we are to do instead with passages, with greater and greater wholes on our way to the concept. In other words, modulation is metacommentary is Marxism.

Horizons of the Dialectic

We may note that what's missing from "Metacommentary" but present in "*La Cousine Bette* and Allegorical Realism" (243, 244, 251) is that august term, the "dialectic" or the discipline known as "dialectical criticism" (*Marxism and Form* 306). Or, more accurately, Jameson uses the word just once in "Metacommentary" in a very unexpected way—that is, to declare Edward Hirsch's *Validity in Interpretation* to be "speculative and dialectical" (18n1). So *that* dialectics isn't really dialectical, and thus this omission goes to the problem of renaming and un-naming. That Jameson doesn't speak of dialectics in "Metacommentary" can only mean he's *doing* them: "what is wanted is a kind of mental procedure which suddenly shifts gears, which throws everything in an inextricable tangle one floor higher" (9). Indeed, in "Metacommentary" he slow-walks

us through this (dialectical) method that isn't named in advance, nor was there a reason for always tagging it in 1971, because "dialectics" was unfamiliar to the English-speaking readers of *PMLA*, most of whom weren't following developments in French and German philosophy and theory, at least not both traditions with equal attention. And by Jameson's own recollection in "Criticism and Categories" of the process of writing *The Political Unconscious* in 1980–81, most literary critics in the United States even then were unaware of what a synthesis of French and German thought could provide.¹⁵ So metacommentary it is, which is the first term Jameson supplied in his essay for understanding not only dialectics *sous rature*, erased yet no less present, but what he would soon call the "political unconscious" (with intimations already in "Metacommentary" [10, 17]) and even later "cognitive mapping," each phrase picking out something specific about interpreting culture at different historical moments: in 1981 during the Thatcher and Reagan administrations and in 1991 deep into postmodernity and late capitalism.

We're struck by the impression that Jameson analyzed aspects of culture for which neither we nor he had yet any isms and names. There was always something on the horizon coming into view. Take, for example, that tumultuous traversal that is the postwar period of the 1950s on into the 1960s and 1970s. You can see Jameson figuring things out across this temporal span. In *The Prison-House of Language* (1972), we are treated to a discussion of the "third moment of structuralism" (168; see 210) rather than what we now know as "poststructuralism," a word never used in the book or for that matter in his very first monograph, *Sartre: The Origins of a Style* (1961), in which the word appears only in the afterword written in 1984 (Afterword 223).¹⁶ In, say, his allusion to Andy Warhol's Campbell soup can in *Marxism and Form*, published in the same year as "Metacommentary," Jameson suspects that modernism is starting to outdo itself in "the photographic objects of pop art" and "the gasoline stations along American superhighways, the glossy photographs in the magazines, or the cellophane

paradise of an American drugstore”—all to say that “the objects of Surrealism are gone without a trace” within “postindustrial capitalism” (105). He calls these trends a “new modernism” and a “new art” (415, 414), which goes to show that, evidently, as yet no one, not even him, had a name for what seemed like a true *société de consommation*, for which the Standard Oil octopus, with its centralized anatomy and smothering menace from the top down, was no longer an adequate caricature. In 1979, however, Jean-François Lyotard gave us the name, “postmodernism,” while in 1980 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari gave us the image, the rhizome (which wasn’t the counterformation they took it to be).¹⁷

But grab your copy of Jameson’s most widely read work, *Postmodernism*, and you get the thing itself, the ism in all its complexity. The book is and was huge, in every sense, and I remember when it hit. Big as this book is, though, it displays Jameson’s epistemological humility, borne of the fact that metacommentary keeps you honest, when he talks about our cognitive limits in interpretation, admitting that we lack concepts or even the hard wiring to think “the new,” such as the emergent spatial politics and practices of postmodern architecture: “we ourselves, the human subjects who happen into this new space, have not kept pace with that evolution; there has been a mutation in the object unaccompanied as yet by any equivalent mutation in the subject” (38–39).¹⁸

The point is that in Jameson there was always something out of our grasp, beyond conceptualization but coming into being, and on the verge of symbolization and naming, and that we need to think with a method that accounts for what’s on the horizon—and how he spoke about and imagined horizons, suggested by the cover image of *Archaeologies of the Future* with its entrancing synthwave vibe. Some find grandiose Jameson’s claim in *The Political Unconscious* that Marxism is the “untranscendable horizon’ that subsumes such apparently antagonistic or incommensurable critical operations, assigning them an undoubted sectoral validity within itself, and thus at once canceling and preserving them” (10).¹⁹ I read these

words, however, as a modest indirection about a very basic point—namely, that reality has a well-known Marxist bias or, if you prefer the chiasmic flip, that Marxism has a well-known reality bias.

Luminous Summits

That “Deleuzian century” Michel Foucault joked about never came. But we could rightly name something large and significant to be “Jamesonian”—be it the stretch of time when Jameson was around for almost a century writing until the very end of his life or his staggeringly capacious mind and expansive way of thinking for which there is really no better term than *genius*. He owed a good deal to every thinker named in the titles of his books and would never countenance what can now be stated without embarrassing our dear friend and late comrade, for whom even our phlegmatic Brechtian epigraph would be too much adulation. His contribution to Marxism and to all thinking persons was his singularity. Itemize and summarize how you will his intellectual achievements. The point is that if the likes of Jameson saw something profoundly important in Marxism, then so can everyone else. Thanks to him, it’s now a bit easier to interpret the world in order to change it, because he built up an immense critical foundation and edifice on every topic and every medium that matters and is, accordingly, the base to the superstructure of all criticism to come. Let’s be very clear: Jameson gave people a way to think about reality and speak about our world, and they must number in the millions.

NOTES

1. “Metacommentary” is significant, too, for earning the MLA’s award for the best article in *PMLA*, the William Riley Parker Prize—and here we can cheerfully include the fact that his other article published in *PMLA* in 1971, “*La Cousine Bette* and Allegorical Realism,” also won the prize for that year, the only time in the history of the award that an author split the honor with himself.

2. Pages earlier, Jameson says this, however: “Yet as we become a single world system, as the other cultures die off, we alone inherit their pasts and assume the attempt to master that

inheritance: *Finnegans Wake*, on the one hand, and Malraux's *Voices of Silence*, on the other, stand as two examples—the mythical and the conceptual—of the attempt to build a syncretistic Western system. In the Socialist countries, where the feeling of a conscious elaboration of a universal world culture and world view is stronger than in our own, the problem of a Marxist hermeneutic poses itself with increasing intensity” (“Metacommentary” 10). What’s missing here is any talk of the “collective,” but it’s close enough in its expression of what’s “actually existing.”

3. As an intermediate step, Jameson includes the final movements of “Metacommentary”—at points verbatim—in the concluding pages of *Marxism and Form* (404–06).

4. This is not a biographical point about Jameson’s discovery of Marxism, which I imagine happened at Haverford at the latest. Here’s some verbiage about our metacommentator back in his college days: “Fred Jameson, who arrived at the house the next year, is the major defender of the literary Weltanschauung in this neck of the woods. As the much-misunderstood editor of the Haverford *Revue*, he can often be seen, clutching his specially pre-packed cigarettes, and with unkempt hair, debating some point of aesthetics with a disgruntled contributor. Apart from his one dramatic effort as the club-footed villain in the *Duchess of Malfi*, this youthful Henry James is addicted to wine, project courses, Fulbright scholarships, taking books out of the library unsigned, writing unreadable sentences, and taking refuge in the many-times repeated playing of a certain Dixieland disc” (*Record* 37; see too the reference to Jameson as a “sly Editor” on 91). What exactly was he “debating” about aesthetics if not their politics? The crack about his “unreadable sentences” should be checked against Jameson’s discussion of his prose style (Interview 87–88). Myself, I find Jameson’s writing to be invigorating and clear.

5. In *Marxism and Form* he regarded this same “leap” to be a “shock” and thus generative—a jolt into self-consciousness about your own critical procedures (347), rather than an “embarrassment” about them.

6. “Formalism is thus . . . the basic mode of interpretation of those who refuse interpretation. . . . Formalism as a method stops short at the point where the novel as a problem begins” (“Metacommentary” 12).

7. Likewise, in 1984, Jameson puts it this way in his analysis of one of Vincent van Gogh’s shoe paintings: we must “reconstruct some initial situation out of which the finished work emerges” (“Postmodernism” 58; repeated in *Postmodernism* 7).

8. As Jameson wrote of *The Political Unconscious* in 2022: “The political, in my view then and now, is the heightened excitement awakened by the intersection of individual experience with the presence of the collective. . . . I called this History, and I still would” (“Criticism” 564).

9. For Jameson, “[w]ith the death of the subject, of the consciousness which governed the point of view,” novels change into plotless, even baggier monsters, in which lived experience becomes a perspective, a character, figure, or voice “reflecting on the meaning of his experiences” and doing “the actual work of exegesis for us before our own eyes”; thus, a “new hermeneutic”

arose “precisely out of the study of such privileged objects” (“Metacommentary” 13)—namely, structuralism.

10. I am repurposing Jameson’s phrase “local validity” from *Political Unconscious* 25.

11. Jameson understands anecdotes to involve naming as well: “The anecdote has the effect of dramatizing before us, not a person (for the solid three-dimensional people present are only storytellers and witty listeners), but rather a reputation, a name. The storyteller, the listener, know what the hero of the anecdote looks like: for them, the name will always be filled in by this familiarity, by the physiological memory, just as the relative sparseness of a theatrical text is filled in onstage by the very bodies and physical presence of the actors” (“*La Cousine Bette*” 250).

For instances of naming and unnamings strategies, see his especially extraordinary essay “War and Representation” 1534–35, 1537, 1539, 1546.

12. To mistake Jameson’s thought process as name-dropping is the most unreflexive position to assume and a sure way to close yourself off to his thinking and, frankly, your education. As many of his students can attest, his understanding of every figure he cites, every work he quotes, runs astonishingly, alarmingly, deep.

13. Jameson’s book of 1971 isn’t called *Marxism and Style*, for reasons that seem obvious in view of the very different titles from the 1950s and 1960s concerning the craft, principles, and elements of style. *Marxism and Form* is not about practicalities of that sort. Even so, after speaking of “linguistic figures themselves, of tropes and rhetoric, in which the operation of dialectical thought is viewed as a process or figure,” Jameson seems to wish he said more about style: “This is, no doubt, the moment to say something about style; and whatever my reservations about stylistics as a method in itself, I remain faithful to the notion that any concrete description of a literary or philosophical phenomenon—if it is to be really complete—has an ultimate obligation to come to terms with the shape of the individual sentences themselves, to give an account of their origin and formation. I have not always, in these chapters, pushed that far” (xii). But he did go that far, after all; see 43; 52, 319, 324–25, 333–35.

14. Here’s another: “With such nightmares, one has the sense that the two categories of internal invasion and intervention and of war carried to foreign, unfamiliar territory coincide and dialectically reinforce each other. This is not so much the pseudo-synthesis of a ‘civil war’ (an oxymoron if there ever was one) as an utter transmutation of the familiar into the alien, the heimlich into the unheimlich, in which the home village—the known world, the real, and the everyday—is transformed into a place of unimaginable horror, while the neighbors of the home country (the eternal peasants, the stock characters of village life) become sly faces of evil and of menace, ambushing the soldier who strays from his company and lynching the few they can safely overpower, concealing food, and hiding in the woods like savages (anachronistically to redeploy that Fenimore Cooper imagery Balzac so relished). But this is something that happens, not so much to individuals, to characters as such, as to the landscape, which fades in and out of nightmare, its mingled dialects now intelligible, now the gibberish of aliens” (“War” 1538).

15. As Jameson reflects: “Now I was writing these chapters in a period of great effervescence and development both in Marxism and in psychoanalysis—it would be enough to mention the names of Jacques Lacan and Louis Althusser to evoke that moment. But although there was much cross-relationship between them, particularly in France, there did not seem to be any systematic attempt to theorize that relationship, and, particularly in this country, there did not exist much in the way of a discussion of their literary or cultural consequences” (“Criticism” 563).

16. Sartre, of course, was not a poststructuralist.

17. Lyotard’s *La condition postmoderne* was published in English in 1984 as *The Postmodern Condition*, and Jameson wrote a foreword critical of the author for failing to practice metacommentary. His critique, among other things, goes to Lyotard’s “lengthy methodological parenthesis”: “This parenthesis once again complicates the arguments of *The Postmodern Condition* insofar as it becomes itself a symptom of the state it seeks to diagnose” (Foreword xi). Had Lyotard practiced metacommentary, he’d notice this very symptom. Jameson’s foreword pairs well with his program essay that same year, “Postmodernism; or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism.”

18. Jameson wished he had used a different word, “postmodernity,” in order to distinguish late capitalism from its “cultural logic,” which is “postmodernism,” and he has said that his thinking changed when “a new word began to appear,” “globalization” (“Aesthetics” 104). Slippery things, those names, including—and someone has to say it—the constant misspelling of Jameson’s first name as Frederic or Frederick, often together in the same book or essay by people studying closely the work of a certain Fredric. Even Jameson’s old yearbook photo, whose subject styles a hybrid jelly-roll do, has this misspelling (*Record* 36; see 4).

19. Jameson earlier floats this suggestion about the priority of Marxist interpretation in *Marxism and Form* (321, 377–78). To be sure, people really groused about Jameson’s claim in *The Political Unconscious* that “metacommentary thus has the advantage of allowing us to measure the yield and density of a properly Marxist interpretive act against those of other interpretive methods—the ethical, the psychoanalytic, the myth-critical, the semiotic, the structural, and the theological—against which it must compete in the ‘pluralism’ of the intellectual marketplace today. . . . [T]he authority of such methods springs from their faithful consonance with this or that local law of a fragmented social life” (10). But it should be remembered that in *Marxism and Form* Jameson first included family in his assessment of the ultimate inadequacy of literary and cultural theory: Adorno, Benjamin, Marcuse,

Bloch, Lukács, and Sartre are all, to him, “partial systems” or “local studies” (306, 307).

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