***The Ancients and the Postmoderns*. Fredric Jameson. London & New York: Verso Press, 2015. Pp. 306 (cloth).**

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Late Jameson, a nebulous authorial entity I date from the publication of *Brecht and Method* (1998), has now eclipsed in sheer bulk and volume those other, older Jamesons (the mighty young scholar-Turk who wrote the mesmerizing sequence from *Sartre* (1961) to the essays collected in the two-volume *Ideologies of Theory* (1988); and the august theorist of the postmodern who spanned the period from the Adorno book, *Late Marxism* (1990), through to the assembled musings of *The Cultural Turn* (1998)—who to this day remain better known and more often cited than this extraordinarily prolific elder Jameson. One reason for that is that it has been difficult to reduce the later Jameson to anything like a consistent argumentative claim or position. If the early Jameson had stood for "taking Continental Theory seriously" and "always historicizing," and the mid-career Jameson had inveigled us to "scan the cultural signs of the present for evidence of their underlying economic logic," this later Jameson remains a more opaque thinker, though there is evidence of some persistent themes and motifs, and one underlying material fact. This latter—that "late Jameson" is exclusively a property of Verso Press, and has therefore been curated by a singular editorial agenda—bears some consideration. For whereas the other Jamesons built their formidable reputations in the established University presses (Princeton, Cornell, Yale, California, Duke, Indiana, Columbia), the likely absence of any rigorous process of academic peer review in the later Jameson volumes signals a retreat from those testing (and often exasperating) trials that mark lesser careers in the business. Or elevation above them: for why, after all, should the winner of the Holberg Memorial Prize have to suffer the indignities of being reviewed by persons who, whatever else they may be, are surely not "peers" in any qualitative sense? Has Jameson any peers? Or does his sui generis stature as "America"s leading Marxist intellectual" demand a different set of protocols regarding his singular research program? It is a question that can be posed of the similarly exclusive relationship that has long stood between Verso and Slavoj Žižek in the Anglophone world (though here offset by forays into MIT Press): how does a bestselling academic superstar actually benefit from being a "property" (in the old-fashioned Hollywood Studio sense) of a non-academic publisher?

In any event, if there are key themes running through Jameson's latest body of work, paramount amongst these would be a return from the contemporary cultural landscape (of buildings, nostalgia film, and cyberpunk) to modernism as a secure base of operations for the materialist dialectic. In a sequence that begins with the book on Brecht, and runs through *A Singular Modernity* (2002), *The Modernist Papers* (2007), and to some extent *The Ancients and the Postmoderns*, Jameson has issued a rich series of theoretical investigations into the representational dynamics of industrial and monopoly capitalism. This has been complemented by a persistent exploration of modernity's utopian currents, as in the essays and interventions assembled in *Archaeologies of the Future* (2005), and the grand statement of *Valences of the Dialectic* (2009). The smaller essay-texts on Marx's *Capital Vol. 1* (2011) and Hegel's *Phenomenology* (2010) appear to be by-products of graduate research seminars: full of insight, but hardly the coordinated argumentative successes that the book-length essays on Formalism and Structuralism (1972), Wyndham Lewis (1979), and contemporary cinema (1992) had been in their time—indeed, the books ought really to have been incorporated into an enlarged edition of *Valences of the Dialectic*, which they supplement superbly. It is only with the penultimate work to date, *The Antinomies of Realism* (2013), that something like a new and generative problematic seems to have announced itself from within this unfolding sequence, now tunnelled far back into the nineteenth century, where a hitherto unsuspected antinomy between affect and *récit* had been lurking all along, patiently awaiting its dialectical elaboration.

I'll want to return to that binary opposition in a moment, but not before a glance at the larger scaffolding by which much of this extraordinary productivity has been framed. *The Poetics of Social Forms*, as this meta-sequence has been dubbed, is described as follows in Sara Danius's biographical sketch of Jameson published on the Holberg Prize website: "a project whose scope and ambition are probably without equal anywhere in the Western world. … In this multi-volume project, Jameson will 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. *The Poetics of Social Forms* will consist of at least six volumes and a few side volumes." What constitutes inclusion in this grand undertaking has been a little unclear, but Philip Wegner's *Periodizing*

Jameson (2014) provides what appears to be an authorized overview of the series as a projected totality, which I here adduce schematically:

> Volume 1: Unnamed work on Myth and Narrative (yet to be published)
> Volume 2: *Overtones: the Harmonics of Allegory* (yet to be published)
> Volume 3: *The Antinomies of Realism* (2013)
> Volume 4: *A Singular Modernity* (2002) and *The Modernist Papers* (2007)
> Volume 5: *Postmodernism* (1991), with *Late Marxism* (1990) as an "'epistemo-critical' prologue"[1]
> Volume 6: Archaeologies of the Future (2005)

Whatever else you may want to say about this series, it does seem remarkable that the absence from it of surely Jameson's most celebrated volume, *The Political Unconscious* (1980)—which magnificently explored the mutations of narrative form and style from the decline of the feudal romance to the emergence of modernism in the light of social and economic transformations—is unaccounted for. Perhaps it will stand as overture and prelude, like Wagner's *Das Rheingold*, *Vorabend* to the whole dazzling cycle. Or perhaps the theoretical apparatus, with its generous helpings of Althusser, Deleuze, and Lévi-Strauss, feels tied to a particular nexus of historical and political determinants that is no longer "ours," no longer capable of truly illuminating the poetics of social forms today. At any rate, the other conclusion we must immediately draw is that *The Ancients and the Postmoderns*—which had looked fair to stand alongside the startling originality of *The Antinomies of Realism* as a companion volume meditating on the historical specificity of realism framed by classicism, modernism, and our own postmodern situation—is not a part of the series at all. What its relation is to the larger project, indeed, remains unclear, though its subtitle, "On the Historicity of Forms," bids openly for inclusion in Jameson's evolving (and unparalleled) discourse on that very topic within the *Poetics of Social Forms*.

But in various ways this book makes rather little sense as a book at all. Its very title gestures at an argument (borrowed from an aperçu of Kluge's) that is never

[1] Wegner, 187.

made: modernism as "our classicism," hinting at a relationship that we postmoderns might enjoy with it that is somehow an echo of the Renaissance itself, inventing its own contemporaneity and modernity out of a recovered cultural heritage. Is that where we stand today? Does modernism confront us as a landscape of ruins on which to dream; a body of authoritative texts out of which to construct a law, an ethos, a new social contract? Is late postmodernism a strategy of reconnection with that rediscovered classicism? Does the "modernist turn," the relative collapse of the paradigm of postmodernity itself, constitute an ideological neoclassicism predicated on conservatism and reaction? These are questions that this book, lacking any introductory statement or explanatory thread, cannot answer other than through the implicit argument made by its collage of essayistic forays into a motley congeries of matters.

The first part, "Our Classicism," is far and away the most substantial in the book, running to almost half its length, and (contained as it is in three essays dedicated to largely pre-twentieth century materials) the most original, both in terms of its relative conceptual adventurousness and inasmuch as less of it has previously been published in other venues. It is also serious and weighty in a way the later sections are not, bristling with a scholarly apparatus (footnotes, indicating a course of research) that quickly falls away in the second and third parts of the book. The first chapter, unexpectedly proposing the commencement of modernity itself at the Council of Trent (1563), scans the Baroque for evidence of that aesthetic tension developed in *Antinomies of Realism* between the protocols of narrative temporality, and the upsurge of a bodily intensity that stills temporal energies into a seizure of affect. In particular, the chapter looks at paintings, specifically those of Caravaggio and Jameson's unlikely hero Rubens, for this evidence, and finds it (after an extraordinary disquisition on paintings of the dead Christ) in full dress in Rubens' monumental *Samson and Delilah* (1609-1610), where the great bulk of Samson's unconscious post-coital musculature is slumped into the lap of his lover in whose luminous face an entire national history is busily writing itself. It is one of Jameson's signature readings, showing how what is ostensibly a "narrative painting" is usurped by a sensual immediacy that "transforms the bodies assembled here and lifts their conjuncture out of normal additive or linear temporality" (20), and disposes the tableau (via Delilah's imperturbable reverie) towards a secular and historical horizon that no previous narrative artwork had been able to vouchsafe. In a word, Rubens

discovers immanence here, since the figures are at once, here and now, representative of their past and emblematic of their futures; but these temporal dimensions are decanted into a living, palpable presence as painted icons. And lo, "the Absolute emerges from just this immanence of the narrative body." (29)

The second chapter then examines Wagner's *Ring* not merely as a musical accomplishment of the highest order, but as a masterpiece of dramaturgy and theatrical allegory as well. The intention is, again, to isolate a tendency in Wagner for the usual operatic dictates of plot and character development to be suspended in order that other "temporalities" might emerge in the space usually reserved for the melodramatic "named emotions" (jealously, despair, betrayal, and so on). These new temporalities, affective in substance and manner, are perforce nameless and homeless, and tend towards an "eternal present" of the body seized by them; their domain in musical history is precisely "Wagnerian chromaticism" strung out along the ideal of an "endless melody" outside of the familiar closures of aria form (40). This giddy musical immanence, whose sudden shifts in emotional temperature find inverted echoes and displaced avatars in completely different parts of the score, generates a problem at the molar level of form: how on earth can "the moments of an unstable and well-nigh neurotically variable subjectivity … be combined into the narrative fabric of the work of art" (41)? Speculating on the formal affinity of the *Ring* with the nineteenth-century family novel, and underlining Nietzsche's point about Wagner being a great miniaturist, Jameson then proceeds to analyse the "problem" of Siegfried as a dramatic character and offer it (without a solution) as a key to the dramatic genius of Wagner's formal intervention. I'll leave that bravura demonstration to the reader's delectation, with the comment that it remains the best demonstration yet hazarded of the hermeneutic rewards offered by the new problematic of affect in Jameson's theorizations of modernity.

But nothing here could have prepared us for what follows, a novella-length discussion (intimations of *Death in Venice*, and Visconti's adaptation!) of Mahler's "form-problems," that doubles as Jameson's most pointed critique of Adorno to date. This long essay, far and away the most significant achievement of the book, reminds one of some of Jameson's most important work: the essay on Conrad in *The Political Unconscious*; the essay on "conspiracy thrillers" in *The Geopolitical Aesthetic* (1992); and "The Existence of Italy" in *Signatures of*

the Visible (1990). What unites these outstanding performances is the vast ambition at work in them, to transcend the limitations of a set of local cultural and artistic "readings" in an effort towards periodization at the level of theory. The period in question here, the later nineteenth and very early twentieth centuries—after Wagner but before Schoenberg—is precisely one of transition, from realism to modernism in literary and painterly terms, but which in musical history assumes a rather different complexion thanks to the absence from it of anything like realism in that sense; unless it be the construction of a formal idiom in which the bourgeoisie might recognise itself as a dominant and stable class. If such an idiom existed, it must have done so in a contradictory parallax view along two disjunctive continua: Beethoven's classical forms, and the Italian operas of Rossini and his progeny, culminating in Verdi. Somewhere in the sonic complexion of these incompatible registers there must have emerged something like a musical "realism" of the ascendant middle-class—nationalistic, patriotic, sensitive to formal language but susceptible to sheer pleasure as such, grandiloquent but sober, narrative but also shot through with moments of pure immanence, abstractly universal but alive to the sentimental pulsions of the body. Comprising a consistent repertoire that the middle class would pay to watch itself listening to as something like a collective, this idiom must then have begin to dissolve under the pressure of two mounting social dynamics: imperialism, on the one hand (displacing the bourgeoisie from itself existentially), and reification (affecting the substance of the artwork with a remorseless process of social objectivity) on the other.

Jameson does not make this argument directly, but his analysis of the case of Mahler demonstrates the extraordinary situation of a working conductor-composer confronted with the pressing realities of this history at the end of the nineteenth century: an orchestra of unprecedented size and sonority; the available form-language of Wagner's chromaticism; the atrophied concert repertoire of Beethoven and Rossini; the emergence of popular and recovered folk-musical idioms; and behind all of that, the objective demise of the sonata form as such and the crisis in "organic form" that it entailed. Mahler's formal solution to this overdetermined crisis in musical form—a predisposition toward episodic musical moments and intensities, and a relative relinquishment of the larger formal laws of unification in which these moments might come to "mean" something other than themselves—is then addressed by Jameson in the spirit of

his ongoing theorization of the opposition between affect and *récit*. Here, then, the felt "presentism" of Mahler's forms can be endorsed as an acceptance of the Wagnerian challenge in the purely musical domain of the symphony as such, henceforth abstracted from all theatrical and operatic plot devices. But this necessarily translates into a methodological rebuttal of Adorno's crushing dismissal of the self-same tendencies in Mahler as "movie music" *avant la lettre*—so much resistible reification and craven capitulation to the cultural logic of capitalism. Jameson, whose infinitely more generous and capacious model of the critical hermeneutics of the dialectic has always sat oddly alongside his Adornian proclivities at the level of style and affiliation, here overtly distances himself from Adorno's "temperamental negativism" and "intellectual negativity" (106), his incorrigibly miserabilist "malaise" (98) and inveterate anti-populism. Instead mounting a case for Mahler's use of "degraded," "kitsch" materials, not simply as blandly "affirmative" (in Adorno's sense) but as responding ingeniously to an objective crisis at the level of form, Jameson then concludes his argument with one of his most emphatic flourishes:

> If music as the temporal art par excellence is one of the fundamental ways in which we construct subjectivity or the individual subject in time, then we have clearly been on the point of suggesting that the Mahlerian present reflects a situation in which human beings are, by virtue of their social and economic constraints, reduced to a kind of diminished life in the present (what I have elsewhere called the reduction to the body). This is then a narrative in which a certain kind of relationship of figure to ground is expressed, along with the ambiguous causality of a resistance or a replication: does the Mahlerian present simply reflect this situation or is it a way of answering and redeeming it, lending transcendence to contingency as it were? (124)

But with this gripping conclusion, the book itself has nowhere especially to go, since it is not composed in such a way as to catch onto such illuminating passages and offer subsequent variations or revisions. It is henceforth assembled out of already published and only intermittently revised essays on a heteroclite assortment of topics, none of which particularly amplify or extend this remarkable demonstration of Jameson's full powers.

The middle section, entitled "Late Modernism in Film," reissues (and in one case substantially reworks) essays on Angelopoulos, Sokurov, and Kieslowski published between 1997 and 2006; but despite the fact that the Angelopoulos essay is now much improved, the dimming of the intellectual temperature is irrefutable, as we leave behind all of the accumulating methodological and theoretical pressures driving the essays of the first part. There is no further discussion of affect; the aesthetic distance between film and music is unaccounted for; and the historical distinction between "our classicism" and "late modernism" is left to the reader to navigate without even a verbal paddle to help the way. These are now occasional papers, disconnected from the argumentative sequence established in the opening section, and emphatically impressionistic and informal in manner. And if that is true of Part Two, how much truer is it still of the final section, "Adaptation as Experiment in the Postmodern," which continues the trend of a decline in intellectual energies, going so far as to include, as the final three chapters, three unmodified book reviews from the *New Left Review* and the *London Review of Books*, all marked by a good deal of paraphrase, a chatty voice, and not a footnote in sight. Moreover, the sheer variety of material covered in this last section cannot really be contained under the rubric of "adaptation" (in at least three chapters, there is no discussion of adaptation at all), and the emergence of a serious interest in Second World culture is left conceptually undeveloped in relation to the book's larger architecture. This is not to say that there are not wonderful discussions and discoveries to be made here, nor that the more informal Jameson we tend to read here is without his charms. But the disappointment is a formal one, since there is no effort to paper over the gulfs in tone, direction, voice, and method, and we are ultimately presented with the stark decision of reading this volume either as an integrated work, or as a collection of essays. It starts, I believe, as the former, and ends ineluctably as the latter.

There have been signs of this tendency in Jameson's larger volumes for the past decade or so. *Archaeologies of the Future* opens with a vast programmatic book-within-a-book, then curates a lifetime's commitment in essay form to the genre of science fiction; *The Modernist Papers* similarly offers a long theoretical framing section, to which is appended an assortment of essays on modernist literature and art; *Valences of the Dialectic* reverses the ploy, and (after a brilliant new essay on the dialectic) front-loads the assembled old essays and

book introductions, before concluding with a bravura new 130-page section on "The Valences of History." Even *The Antinomies of Realism* intersperses its considerable range of new materials with chapters reprinted from other sources (without necessarily always removing the evidence of those other locations). But in *The Ancients and the Postmoderns*, what is missing is any substantial new framing argument or methodological statement to begin with, so that the various chapters fail to cohere in any satisfying sense. It would, in that case, have been preferable for Verso to craft and market the book more honestly as a collection of essays (in the vein of *Ideologies of Theory*); but by producing a volume sharing many of the same physical attributes of its predecessor (format, style, font, cover "look," etc), the press has dissimulated the book as something is not, namely a distinctive contribution to *The Poetics of Social Forms*.

However, along the lines of Jameson's confession in his essay on the *Dekalog*—namely that his favourite part of the final episode is "something that does not take place in it, namely a misrecollection on my part" which "strikes me still as an interesting alternate version (175-76)—I should like to conjure out of this uneven collection the spectre of an alternate version that might answer to the ambitions of its title. In the first place, the division into two discrete and spatially sundered essays of Jameson's remarkable work on Wagner—"Wagner as Dramatist and Allegorist," and his consideration of Holten's staging of the Copenhagen *Ring* and *Tannhäuser* in "Eurotrash or *Regieoper*?"—ought really to have been reconciled within the parameters of a single argument, one which could have used the contemporary dramaturgy as a way into the more persistent and historical problems affecting Wagner's theatricality. As it stands, this divided work begs as many questions as it settles, especially as regards the contemporaneity of Wagner as one of "our classics." Furthermore, this might then have been integrated with the lengthy Mahler essay into a section on musical modernization and postmodernization. As well, the strange separation of the essay on Altman from the work on "late modernism" in three European filmmakers might have been rethought, to allow for a more interesting critical paradigm—on, say, episodic form—to emerge with which to bring together the book's treatment of cinema (and television, as the essay on Simon's *The Wire* would also fit here) in more dynamic ways. This would have left us with a musical and a cinematic section, each fully reworked to allow for resonances—specifically around the issues of "presentism" and "part/whole" problematics—

to sound between the two parts. And since the material on literature seems to detract more than to add to this fascinating latent argument, it might well have been dropped altogether, since the reviews of which it is composed are readily available elsewhere. But these are idle fantasies, stimulated by the powerful memory of what Jameson's sense of architectural form is capable of achieving in his best books (very much including his previous one).

At its best, as in the essay on Mahler, the current book sounds the full range of instrumental notes and tones of which the Jamesonian style is famously capable, and reminds us what an inestimable resource he continues to be as a guide to the complexities of aesthetic form under the material conditions of capitalism. As ever, it is his style, even more than his mastery of the conceptual topoi, that puts into practice the principles of a criticism worthy of its name, since in its commitment to metaphor and allegory this style indefatigably undertakes to reconnect what has been separated, at least for the conjunctural duration of another passionate phenomenological investment in the sensory particular:

> So in the closing pages of the third movement of the Fourth Symphony, the famous Andante, the *ruhevoll* melodic opening, which promises us a slow movement whose length will depend a little on the conductor's temperament, strange and unexpectedly variable things begin to happen: a kind of scurrying among the smaller animals of the orchestra, hastening the tempo; and then suddenly an extraordinarily languorous lyrical movement which is followed by a truly transcendental outburst of the orchestra at its loudest and its most aspirational reaching upwards for sublimity and height, and followed by those eerie sounds Schoenberg's Hollywood pupils composed for the musical background of horror films or science fiction, the whole then settling back down into the theme with which the movement began, and *basta!* in such a way that we are not really sure of being satisfied by this conventional return, a problem solved for us, as said before (qua! qua! qua!), by the unexpected closure of the song which is the next and last movement. (102)

We can now look forward to the next two scheduled Jameson books from Verso—*An American Utopia: Dual Power and the Universal Army* (2016) and *Raymond Chandler: The Detections of Totality* (2016)—before his culminating work on *The Poetics of Social Forms* can finally see the light of day.