

marxism

FREDRIC JAMESON

IAN BUCHANAN, EDITOR

Jameson on Jameson

POST-CONTEMPORARY

INTERVENTIONS

Series Editors:

Stanley Fish and Fredric Jameson

Jameson

on Jameson

CONVERSATIONS ON CULTURAL MARXISM

Edited by IAN BUCHANAN

DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Durham & London

2007

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Printed in the United States of America

on acid-free paper ∞

Designed by Amy Ruth Buchanan

Typeset in Minion by G&S Typesetters.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data appear on the last printed page of this book.

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FOR MY STUDENTS

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FOREWORD

You have to take the work as a whole, to try and follow rather than judge it, see where it branches out in different directions, where it gets bogged down, moves forward, makes a breakthrough; you have to accept it, welcome it, as a whole. Otherwise you just won't understand it at all.

—GILLES DELEUZE, *Negotiations*

Terry Eagleton's quip that Fredric Jameson appears to have read every significant work of literature is only a partial acknowledgment of his accomplishments as a comparativist: one needs to add that he appears to have watched every significant movie, listened to every significant piece of music, visited all the major cities and viewed all the major buildings as well.¹ Probably the only adequate compliment is Colin MacCabe's admiring remark that nothing "cultural is alien to" Jameson.²

But to call Jameson a comparativist only makes sense to the extent that it is understood that he is foremost a historical materialist and that comparative studies in art, film, and literature are his means of mapping historical change. His means of tracking down change, though, is not, as it might sometimes appear, the relentless cataloguing of all the new things that are constantly being thrown up by this enormously productive global culture we know today. Yet having said that, there is no one more aware of or more sensitive to the breadth of cultural production operative in the world today. Piling example upon example of what has been said and done does not give rise to an understanding of history; it simply gives us an accumulatively produced description that has no way of discerning in any analytically useful way what should or should not be subsumed under its categories. If every new thing is postmodern or a sign of postmodernism, say, then that particular periodizing category is effectively voided. Its result is that "heap of fragments" Jameson warns us about that is no more legible to us than a pile of shoes. What Jameson tries to do instead is triangulate

what is missing, or, more specifically, that which could not be said, written, painted, sculpted, or filmed in our time because somehow and for reasons not disclosed it was out of step with history. He does not so much *read* texts as *diagnose* them.

I would claim that it is the development of dialectical criticism that stands as Jameson's supreme achievement.³ The "dialectic is not a thing of the past," he insists, "but rather a speculative account of some thinking of the future which has not yet been realised: an unfinished project, as Habermas might put it; a way of grasping situations and events that does not yet exist as a collective habit because the concrete form of social life to which it corresponds has not yet come into being."⁴ Dialectical criticism's twofold purpose, as Jameson defines it, is to uncover the ways in which a now more or less fully global culture disguises its strategic interests while simultaneously keeping alive thoughts of the future. This task can be specified, in practical terms, as the urgent need to track down and diagnose two different kinds of failure of the imagination: the first is the failure to develop a usable representation of the present, one that enables us to see its limitations as well as its strengths, but more importantly enables us to perceive its deep systemic nature; the second is a failure to imagine a form of the future that is neither a prolongation of the present nor its apocalyptic demise.

There is no one—or final—form of dialectical criticism. "Dialectical terminology is therefore never stable in some older analytical or Cartesian sense: it builds on its own uses in the process of development of the dialectical text, using its initial provisory formulations as a ladder that can either be kicked away or drawn up behind you in later 'moments' of the text."⁵ Marxism "is a critical rather than a systematic philosophy," Jameson argues; its appearance always comes in the form of "a correction of other positions" or "a rectification in dialectical fashion of some pre-existing phenomenon," so that we should not expect it to (also) take the form of self-contained or scholastic doctrine. "This is to say that we cannot really understand Marx's materialism until we understand that which it is directed *against*, that which it is designed to *correct*; and it is worth pointing out that the materialist dialectic has not one basic philosophical enemy but two"—namely, idealism (history as prediction) and realism (common sense), understood in their classical or philosophical senses.⁶ These two enemies are as adaptable to circumstances and as resilient to attack as viruses: "The question becomes one of deciding which of these two philosophical attitudes is to be understood as the principal ideological instrument of the middle classes, which of them is the source of the mystification which then becomes the object of the

specifically Marxist critique" (366). Jameson concludes that "the dominant ideology of the Western countries is clearly that Anglo-American empirical realism for which all dialectical thinking represents a threat, and whose mission is essentially to serve as a check on social consciousness: allowing legal and ethical answers to be given to economic questions, substituting the language of political equality for that of economic inequality and considerations about freedom for doubts about capitalism" (367). One does not even have to squint one's eyes to see that these remarks from thirty years ago describe with uncanny accuracy the political situation we are faced with today. In such a situation, Jameson's conviction, expressed in the same place, that it falls to literary and cultural criticism "to continue to compare the inside and the outside, existence and history, to continue to pass judgement on the abstract quality of life in the present, and to keep alive the idea of a concrete future" (416), has the same fresh urgency today as it did then. This is why Jameson's work proves so important. Ours still seems to be an age "when people no longer understand what dialectical thinking is or why the dialectic came into being in the first place, when they have abandoned the dialectic for less rewarding Nietzschean positions."⁷

In a late aperçu on the fate of the dialectic in contemporary theory, Jameson writes: "I have found it useful to characterise the dialectic in three different ways, which surely do not exhaust the possibilities, but may at least clarify the discussion and also alert us to possible confusions or category mistakes, to interferences between them."⁸ The three ways of characterizing the dialectic are: (1) in terms of reflexivity, as a necessary second-guessing or reconsideration of the very terms and concepts of one's analytic apparatus; (2) in terms of a problematization of causality and historical narrative; and (3) in terms of the production of contradiction. The third form is the most developed in Jameson's work and finds its most refined expression in his account of what he calls "metacommentary," which is as near as he comes to offering a method (but it is a method that is adapted and altered according to the demands of the specific case at hand). Needless to say, these three ways of conceiving the dialectic should not be seen as in any way mutually exclusive of one another. It would be more accurate to see them as the three sides of a triangle.

The nearest Jameson comes to offering a template for dialectical criticism is his essay entitled "Metacommentary," first presented at the 1971 convention of the Modern Language Association, where, as it happens, it was awarded the association's William Riley Parker Prize. In typical fashion, he approaches the general theoretical problem that concerns him via

a confrontation with a contemporary false problem, in this case the alleged end of interpretation, or more specifically the end of content, the former being conditional on the latter, which we associate with Susan Sontag's influential 1965 essay "Against Interpretation." As Jameson points out, Sontag's piece was only the latest permutation of this critical turn. All the great schools of thought that shaped twentieth-century literary and philosophical thinking, from logical positivism and pragmatism through existentialism, Russian formalism and structuralism "share a renunciation of *content*" and "find their fulfillment in formalism, in the refusal of all presuppositions about substance and human nature, and in the substitution of method for metaphysical system."⁹

Jameson's response to these debates was to stage a threefold reversal:

1. At the local level, that of the highly routinized practice of interpreting texts, Jameson argues that there is no need to interpret texts (not that it is impossible to do so) because they come to us as already interpreted.
2. At the wider level of how one should go about interpreting texts, and indeed concerning the question of whether it is even possible to do so, Jameson argues that this question is always decided in advance in the logic of the mode of criticism itself. The important question is therefore not how one should interpret a text but why one would want to do so in the first place.
3. At the level of discourse, or of the social itself, he argues that both these questions need to be reexamined from the perspective of their historical necessity—why is it, in other words, that one kind of critical practice is able to triumph at another's expense?

Taken together, these three propositions constitute the basic architecture of the method Jameson provisionally termed metacommentary.

The first proposition, that texts do not need to be interpreted because they are already interpreted, is argued for in the following way: the raw material of texts, what is usually called content, is "never initially formless, never, like the unshaped substances of the other arts, initially contingent, but rather is itself already meaningful from the outset, being nothing more nor less than the very components of our concrete social life: words, thoughts, objects, desires, people, places, activities."¹⁰ The work of art does not make these things meaningful—they are already meaningful—but rather transforms their meaning, or else rearranges them in such a way as to heighten and intensify their meaningfulness. This process is not arbitrary, however, but follows an inner logic that can be abstracted, which is to

say thought about and considered independently of the text itself. Jameson's hypothesis is that this logic takes the form of a censorship, the internally consistent and inwardly felt need to not say some things and to try to say other things in their place.

In this respect, as Jameson readily acknowledges, metacommentary "implies a model not unlike the Freudian hermeneutic (divested, to be sure, of its own specific content, of the topology of the unconscious, the nature of the libido, and so forth), one based on the distinction between symptom and repressed idea, between manifest and latent content, between the message and the message disguised."¹¹ This image can stand as shorthand for what it is the metacommentary does, provided it is understood that the object of the game is not to redeem or restore the suppressed content, but to uncover the logic of that suppression. As Slavoj Žižek helpfully reminds us, the structure of Freud's interpretative model is in fact triple, not double as is commonly assumed: its three operative elements are (1) the manifest content; (2) the latent content; and (3) unconscious desire:

This desire attaches itself to the dream, it intercalates itself in the interspace between the latent thought and the manifest content; it is therefore not "more concealed, deeper" in relation to the latent thought, it is decidedly more "on the surface," consisting entirely of the signifier's mechanisms, of the treatment to which the latent thought is submitted. In other words, its only place is in the *form* of the "dream": the real subject matter of the dream (the unconscious desire) articulates itself in the dream-work, in the elaboration of its "latent content."¹²

Not only is the manifest content already meaningful but so is the latent content as well—indeed, if this were not the case, the entire Freudian hermeneutic would be disabled.

It follows, then, that the essential dialectical question is not what has been repressed in the course of the writing process, although that is important, nor why it is repressed, though that is important too, but rather how does that repression work. The cognate concepts of the "political unconscious," *pensée sauvage*, as well as the later notion of "cultural logic," all refer essentially to this process and not, it must be added, to some secret reservoir of meanings buried deep in the text. In answer to the "why" question, Jameson finds a great deal to interest him in Freud's short paper of 1908, "Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming."¹³ Freud's basic argument is that other people's fantasies—including fetishes and obsessions—when communicated in their raw form are actually kind of boring and even

a little repellent (this is true even for the psychoanalyst whose job often consists in nothing more than listening to precisely such boring and repellent stories). If the writer does not want to put us off—if, in other words, he or she is to take proper notice of their audience—then he or she has to find a way of disguising their fetishes and giving them another form. This, Freud suggests, is the basic task of aesthetics, and our pleasure in reading derives from our appreciation of the skill the writer exercises in keeping their text free from embarrassingly personal elements, all the while giving us access to the full power of their imagination.

We cannot complete this task in any satisfactory way, however, without also determining the nature of the repressed message itself, which for Jameson is not a matter of private fantasies and fetishes, but rather the public—that is to say, collective—anxiety of the nature and quality of lived experience itself for which the shorthand *history* serves duty to refer to throughout Jameson's work. Private fantasies and fetishes are simply symptomatic responses to the deeper realities of what has been described above as the mode of production and need to be interpreted in terms of the privations of history rather than the psychopathologies of sexual dysfunction. More pointedly, they express in their own perverse way a longing for an altered form of life, one in which certain satisfactions are readily supplied and do not suffer the proscriptions of our own moralizing universe, and can in this sense be seen as utopian:

Yet the content of such experience can never be determined in advance, and varies from the most grandiose forms of action to the most minute and limited feelings and perceptions in which consciousness can be specialised. It is easier to express the properties of this phenomenon negatively, by saying that the idea of Experience always presupposes its opposite, that is, a kind of life that is mere vegetation, that is routine, emptiness, passage of time.¹⁴

The work of art juxtaposes the representation of a lived experience as its basic content with an implied question as to the very possibility of a meaningful "Experience" as its form:

It thereby obeys a double impulse. On the one hand, it preserves the subject's fitful contact with genuine life and serves as the repository for that mutilated fragment of Experience which is her treasure, or his. Meanwhile, its mechanisms function as a censorship, which secures the subject against awareness of the resulting impoverishment, while pre-

venting him/her from identifying connections between that impoverishment and mutilation and the social system itself.¹⁵

The ultimate obscenity, and that which we must try to find the means of coming to terms with, is history itself, but not the dry and inert catalogue of “facts” and spurious narratives we encounter in textbooks. History, for Jameson, is a living thing, and it is the task of critics to show how its beating heart animates *all* forms of cultural production. Here we have to be careful not to lapse into the backward idea that history is simply the context against which cultural texts should be read.

Jameson’s slogan “Always historicize,” with which *The Political Unconscious* famously opens, means something rather more than simply reading texts in their historical context, yet this is very often how it is understood. His purpose is not, for instance, either comparable or compatible with the New Historicist project initiated by Stephen Greenblatt and Walter Benn Michaels, among others, even though at first glance there might appear to be some obvious affinities.¹⁶ The difference, and it is a large one, is that their relative conceptions of history are utterly at odds. New Historicism is committed to a subject-centered view of history. It is concerned with the intriguing texture of specific lives. It exhumes the objects and documents, public records and private memoirs, of a distant past to fashion a “montage” (Jameson’s word) of details creating the illusion of interiority, very much in the manner of cinema, thereby giving us a vivid sense of what it must have felt like to be that person. But it is a hallucination. By assembling the everyday items some historical figure or other, Shakespeare or Marlowe say, must have been surrounded by, must have routinely used, or thought about, the historian’s eye begins to seem as though it is mimicking the subject’s I, and the illusion is formed. We feel as though we are seeing “their” world in the same way they did, and as a consequence, they always seem more modern than we expected them to be.

By contrast, Jameson is committed to an object-centered view of history in which private lives are lived in confrontation with the deeper drama of what Marxism terms the mode of production, which refers to the manner and means of generating and distributing wealth on a social scale. He rejects those histories which continue to believe (as New Historicism plainly does) that social and cultural change can be grasped phenomenologically, from the perspective of a single individual, and argues in favor of a philosophy of history which can come to grips with what he calls the “scandal” of social and cultural change, which always comes from the outside and in a

form that is beyond sense.¹⁷ The only philosophy of history capable of satisfying that demand, Jameson argues, is Marxism.

To imagine that, sheltered from the omnipresence of history and the implacable influence of the social, there already exists a realm of freedom—whether it be that of the microscopic experience of words in a text or the ecstasies and intensities of the various private religions—is only to strengthen the grip of Necessity over all such blind zones in which the individual seeks refuge, in pursuit of a purely individual, a merely psychological, project of salvation. The only effective liberation from such constraint begins with the recognition that there is nothing that is not social and historical—indeed, that everything is “in the last analysis” political. (20)

“Only Marxism,” he writes, “can give us an adequate account of the essential *mystery* of the cultural past, which, like Tiresias drinking the blood, is momentarily returned to life and warmth and allowed once more to speak, and to deliver its long forgotten message in surroundings utterly alien to it” (19).¹⁸ Only Marxism situates the individual life “within the unity of a single great collective story,” namely, the “collective struggle to wrest a realm of Freedom from a realm of Necessity” (19). The principal polemical purpose of his work, then, is to “argue the priority of a Marxian interpretive framework” (10), but not as one might expect by arguing against other interpretative frameworks in a combative spirit and knocking them out of contention (which is not to say, however, that he does not do precisely that, namely, argue against other interpretative frameworks, only that this is not his principal aim, nor indeed his principal strategy). His strategy is rather bolder, and indeed rather more combative, than that. Jameson proposes to subsume all the other interpretative frameworks by subsuming them under one single, “untranscendable horizon,” that of Marxism itself (10). His point, as *Marxism and Form* instructed, is that “Marxism is not just one more theory of history, but on the contrary the ‘end’ or abolition of theories of history as such.”¹⁹

—Ian Buchanan

NOTES

1. Terry Eagleton, “Making a Break,” *London Review of Books*, 9 March 2006, 25–26. Jameson’s capacity to watch movies is indeed a kind of perceptual athleticism, as the editors of the “Sport” issue of the *South Atlantic Quarterly* 95:2 (1996)

comically imply in their picture gallery of the volume's authors doing something sporty, in which Jameson is depicted as a "movie marathoner."

2. Colin MacCabe, preface to *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System*, by Fredric Jameson (London: British Film Institute, 1992), ix.

3. See my *Fredric Jameson: Live Theory* (New York: Continuum, 2006).

4. Fredric Jameson, "Persistencies of the Dialectic: Three Sites," *Science and Society* 62:3 (1998): 359.

5. Fredric Jameson, interview with Green, et al., this volume, 24.

6. Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 366.

7. Fredric Jameson, "Interview with Fredric Jameson," in Eve Corredor, *Lukács After Communism: Interviews with Contemporary Intellectuals* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 93.

8. Jameson, "Persistencies of the Dialectic," 360.

9. Fredric Jameson, *The Ideologies of Theory: Essays, 1971–1986*, vol. 1, *Situations of Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 3.

10. *Ibid.*, 14.

11. *Ibid.*, 13.

12. Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), 13.

13. Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Routledge, 1981), 175; Jameson, *Ideologies of Theory*, 76–77; Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2005), 45–47.

14. *Ideologies of Theory*, 16.

15. *Ibid.*

16. Jameson gives a long account of his response to New Historicism in his *Post-modernism; or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 181–217.

17. Jameson, *Political Unconscious*, 26.

18. The same image is used in Jameson, *Ideologies of Theory*, 158.

19. Jameson, *Marxism and Form*, 321.

INTRODUCTION: On Not Giving Interviews

The mixed feelings I have about these interviews has little enough to do with their quality. Sometimes, indeed, having not only forgotten what I said but even the occasion and the question that was asked in the first place, I am able to indulge myself in admiring my answers. Most often, however, it is the skill of the interviewer that is to be admired, in a subtle and demanding form that has its own strategy and tactics, so that its practitioners have a chance to shine as much as their subjects: a work in two voices, then, which at its best can offer a counterpoint of curiosity and avowal, the enthusiasm of occasional agreement, the peremptory taking of positions on both sides, along with tactful modulations, the reprise of second thoughts, the satisfaction of formulations, and in general a lively variation in the tempo of the exchange.

The gratification an interviewee can take from these situations is to find confirmation of the interrelationship of his work within itself, and of the connections of one kind of thought or interest with another, connections which are not often remembered or evident. To discover the kinship between earlier positions or interests and much later ones is, to be sure, not quite so satisfying: as though you never really moved from the spot after all, or kept returning to it. My initial formation in Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophy, for example, is often today more insistent in the return of its habits; and it ought perhaps to be an embarrassment in a historical period in which, for all kinds of reasons—humanism, feminism, Marxism, elitism, totalization—this figure is still under a massive cloud. I can, to be sure, tell myself—and demonstrate for others—the degree to which much remains productive in existential philosophy, not least in emphases which contemporary thought has neglected or forgotten.

But I feel it is best to come at such matters from a different way, and to grasp one's relationship to such a system as one of learning a code or a language. Influence, to be sure, is one of the stupider ways of talking about it, which should rather be turned inside out and described in terms of need, and indeed, the need for a new language. A philosophy grips us

because it suddenly has answers for our questions and solutions to our problems: but that is the least of it, and the answers and solutions are what become most quickly dated. What electrifies us is not so much those, but rather the new language in which the need—the questions and problems—suddenly become visible in the first place. Now suddenly the syntax of this new language makes it possible to think new thoughts and to perceive the landscape of a whole new situation, as though the mist of older common-places had begun to burn away. My point is that the conceptual language we first learned with such a passion is not really to be replaced by the newer languages we add to it, any more than our exciting new German causes the primal French to disappear—at best, you end up speaking the former with a French accent, and even returning to English itself as though it were the idiom of an unfamiliar tribe.

It is a position which is probably not calculated to comfort the philosophers in their vocation: for it presupposes a situation in which some immense preverbal *In-der-Welt-sein* (being-in-the-world) exists, which can be modeled now this way, now that, by the philosophical terminology of what is essentially a representational rather than a conceptual system. Like those lenses the opticians alternate across the vision of the individual eye, these constellations of philosophical nomenclature bring into focus and then lose again whole zones of what lies out there to be seen, and which they can be said to construct; just as one language can say things which another cannot (however subtly it registers its own syntactical world).

Is this to say that all conceptuality is figurative, or that philosophy is just another form of literature? Only if you complete the seemingly trivializing and reductive thought by insisting on the conceptuality inherent in figuration itself, and on the way in which “literature” is itself an operation we perform on reality, which brings it into being just as surely as the terms and concepts of the philosophers, or as we might prefer to call them, the theoreticians. Yes, in that case, literature is just as surely theory as the philosophical text: but we have to work hard at each of these kinds of printed materials in order to grasp them as machines for constructing the world at the same time that they register it.

But this is a position of mine which leaves me fairly indifferent to the kinds of differences philosophers generally fight about. It is certainly always helpful to have some really sharp and tough thinker and writer make an inventory—with the polemical passion of the disciple or the withering coolness of the expert—of the incompatibilities, say, between the idealism of the one and the materialism of the other. But for me this inventory is

valuable above all in the way in which it allows us to measure the constructional and perceptual strengths and weaknesses of a given system. We're all idealists, all materialists; and the final judgment or label is simply a matter of ideology, or, if you prefer, of political commitment.

In my own case, the list of language conversions, after some initial Sartreanism (and no doubt Poundism), would be fairly long: structuralism, Greimassian semiotics, Frankfurt School dialectics and sentences (but also Proustian sentences), Heideggerianism, Deleuzianism, Lacanianism (cum Mallarmé). . . . It is clear that these are not all really styles as such: Algirdas Greimas's sentences did not form the mind (but perhaps you can say that he translated it into visual diagrams); Claude Lévi-Strauss is a fine writer, but of an old-fashioned belle-lettristic type which no one wants to imitate any more. Nor does the list really convey any unprincipled pluralism, despite the appearances: my tolerance for other conceptual languages is not inexhaustible, and it seems to be mainly Franco-German. I draw the line at most Anglo-American idioms, such as British empiricism or Wittgensteinianism: but an even more fundamental line has to do with Marxism and/or politics, and I would certainly be willing to subscribe to Alain Badiou's four truth conditions—four modes of access to the Absolute—politics, art, love (he means sexuality, gender, and psychoanalysis) and science (mathematics)—provided I was allowed to omit the science!

Still, the continuities between these things remain to be explored: why did so many Sartreans convert to Greimassian semiotics, for example? This mysterious affinity evidently has something to do with the way in which phenomenology offered some initial space for detecting the omnipresence of ideology, which Greimassian analysis (the semiotic square, for example) then offered to sort out into its component parts and its mechanisms. Alternately, it would be productive to follow the dialectic through these bewilderingly different languages and to see if their fascination and what is (for me) empowering, productive, and usable in them has anything to do with its secret workings.

The interviews, then, are mainly interesting for me to the degree to which they put me on the track of some inner unity between all these interests, whether they are intellectual or aesthetic flirtations or deeper passions and commitments. (Sometimes such relations are so deep you fail to notice them yourself: Doug Kellner once pointed out the omnipresence of Karl Korsch in my *Marxism and Form*. I must have thought it was so obvious I didn't have to mention it; and the same goes for Fernand Braudel in *The Political Unconscious*.)

But this can be a problem in itself: “perché vuol mettere I suoi idee in ordine?” (Why do you want to put your ideas in order?) as Mussolini once said to Pound. What does it mean to take this kind of satisfaction in the underlying unity of your interests if not as the sign and affirmation of precisely that personal identity and that unification of subjectivity that we are not supposed to harbor any longer in the age of Fourier’s butterfly temperament. Multiple subject positions, parcellization, schizophrenic fragmentation (of the ideal type)—all seem to shift the emphasis from Identity to Difference, and to cast doubt on the kind of thematic or conceptual unification we used to pursue. I guess I prefer to think of the matter in aesthetic terms, in terms of stylistic variety: “There should be something to eat and drink on every page,” Gustave Flaubert once said; it is an excellent rule for including as much dissonance and heterogeneity as you can take. Maybe Fourier was onto something when he said that people could not concentrate more than two hours on a single activity: something that explains the now canonical length of movies (since the sound era at least) and that has certainly been scaled back to fifty or sixty minutes when we come to lectures and maybe even interviews or conversations as such.

But now I had better come to what is for me the structural flaw (I’m not sure I want to call it a contradiction) in the interview as a form. It has to do with the transformation of concepts into opinions, the processing of episteme into doxa (to use Plato’s language), the way in which intellectual commitments are transformed into so many optional thoughts or “ideas” that can be compared or contrasted with others of the same type, which one can swap like stamps or baseball cards, or ferociously defend like your favorite clothing style or haircut. Indeed, in the old days, the most important qualification for a teacher or a news commentator or a cultural interpreter was to have strong opinions that could be trotted out on all occasions and put forcefully enough to intimidate the student, consumer, or public. It’s wrong to say that people like that knew everything or pretended to: no, but they had opinions on everything and were never at a loss. I think this fashion has passed in the academic world, and that that kind of journalism has also disappeared; but the mode is still alive on the talk shows, where opinions are still admired.

But what is the opposite of opinion? Plato thought it was the truth, but critics of sheer opinion today would probably not want to follow him in this in a postmodern age, in which “truth” so often seems to take the form of one more dogmatic opinion. I postponed the discussion by speaking of “intellectual commitments” a moment ago in order to avoid dealing with this question: now I must try to say what it is that has deeper roots than sheer

opinion (and perhaps even a wholly different soil or source). The pragmatists called it belief, but that also seems to postpone the problem in a different way; while the equally facile alternative of “ideology” does so by leading us back to something more on the order of error, if not of opinion itself, albeit opinion with its substructure in the unconscious (images of embedding and depth seem inescapable in this particular context). But I have also previously called such convictions “interests,” thinking of that key moment in *Dr. Faustus* when Zeitblom asks Adrian whether he knows anything stronger than love, and receives the answer, “Yes, interest.” The connotations of interest in that sense of attention and curiosity and the investment of time and vital energies (rather than their dividends) then perhaps leads us on to the more satisfactory existential accounts of the “originary project”: of my choice of being and of commitment which turn this matter of “truth” or Platonic “knowledge” in the direction of activity and the imagery of rootedness or the Unconscious into a relationship to Being itself. This may still be relativism, but it is a relativism of absolutes and of ontological commitments, and not of opinions or even of ideological symptoms.

At any rate, the interview as a form inevitably turns the former into the latter and flattens interests and commitments out into a stream of intermittently entertaining (or boring) thoughts. It is certainly a form in its own right, and when skillfully executed offers the pleasures peculiar to it (as the Aristotelians might put it), but they are pleasures more closely affiliated with curiosity and gossip than with practice and the project. I say this only to specify and differentiate, and not to moralize, as Martin Heidegger does about gossip, which I myself somewhere (talking about Marcel Proust) went so far as to characterize as Utopian. Well, it is certainly collective.

But these mild pleasures have to be paid for by a deterioration in the language itself, which is to my mind even more serious than anything that happens in the transubstantiation of episteme into doxa, although it can be said (by those in a hurry) to amount to the same thing. This is the immobilization of the very process of formulating into the final form of a slogan: the final crystallization of the opinion-commodity into a catchphrase that can be appealed to in any context, and reused over and over again without any tangible wear and tear. In the individual interview, this process is triumphant, a genuine discovery procedure from which something definitive emerges. Unfortunately, after several versions of this, the discovery is reduced to a tiresome repetition, which can at best send us back to the original moment of production and at worst stand as the symptom of some fatuous self-satisfaction.

For the interviewee, however, this formal requirement encourages bad habits indeed and turns the mind in the direction of concentrated formulations from which thinking only slowly recovers, if at all. The logic of the stylistic *trouvaille* is, to be sure, at one with commodification and fashion as such, whose relations with the modern and modernism have often been noted. Beyond that, however, it can be identified as a form of reification—or to use a more recent version, of thematization—in which a former idea has been turned into an idea-object, or indeed a word or theme: that final expression, as Ludwig Wittgenstein said of the truth, with which we agree to stop.

Unfortunately, the rhythms of intellectual reification are at one with the public sphere itself, which demands a constant traffic in such tokens, which it calls ideas. What would be the point, indeed, of holding an interview designed to avoid ideas? The named idea, like the various forms of money itself, is the indispensable unit of circulation of the public sphere, very much including the educational institutions, whose interminable debates about pedagogy turn over and over again on the problem of making students “think,” which is to say, on avoiding just such thematized opinions and stereotypes, just such interiorized prejudices and commonplaces, in the first place. If this is understood as a tension that can never be resolved, however—as an interminable alternation between the wandering mind and the stylistic or linguistic freeze frame—then the customary search for a resolution might be converted into a method for perpetuating the alternation itself and keeping the whole process going, as something we have to use cleverly since we cannot do away with it, at least in this society.

For to nonthematized ideas would correspond anonymous subjects, one would think: an intellectual Utopia achieved as much as the abolition of intellectual private property as by the eclipse of the public sphere as a separate realm altogether, reabsorbed back into sheer immanence. Whether this is a prospect intellectuals can fantasize with relish and gusto, I leave decently unexplored in a collection destined for them, where the anti-intellectual or populist note would certainly be ungrateful.

The fluctuations in the content of these interviews also tells me something about the ambiguities of my own work, or at least of the more current readings of it, which seem to alternate between an interest in its Marxism and a curiosity about the phenomenon of postmodernity it only later on began to describe. The first interview, by Jonathan Culler and his colleagues at *Diacritics*, was largely concerned with Marxism as such, with its literary critical possibilities, its contribution to methodology, and also to the kind

of politics my own version of Marxism seemed to imply. Later on, it is only in the non-Western interviews, by Paik Nak-chung and by Sabry Hafez and his colleagues Abbas Al-Tonsi and Mona Abousenna, that these preoccupations return with any direct force, as though possibilities were sensed in those situations that had become obsolete in the standard Western ones. As for China and Brazil, the two places in which my work has always aroused the greatest interest (something I have been very gratified by), I'm sorry to say that after the publication of *A Singular Modernity* (2002), in which the very concept of "alternate modernities" was dismissed, my Chinese and Brazilian readers seem to have parted company with me, accusing me of being yet another Western or first world theorist preaching to the rest of the world and seeking to impose Western theories on it. I must still feel, unfortunately, that the only possible "alternate modernity" open to us today is called socialism, and that merely cultural versions of these forms of difference are not very helpful. But perhaps what pained my critics more was less the attempt to impose my Western thinking on them than my expectation that they would develop alternatives that might reenergize us in the West or the first world: an expectation perhaps too hard to live up to.

As for the cultural alternatives, the basic positions on this seem to me wonderfully dramatized in the engagement with Stuart Hall, for whose intellectual generosity I am grateful, and whose insistence on resituating these issues within specific national situations I much appreciated. This fundamental engagement is then played out in a different way in the opposition between economics and politics I tried rather heavy-handedly to explain in the interview with Sabry Hafez: I hope to return to this "explanation" in another place and eventually to clarify it. The interview with Sara Danus and Stefan Jonsson also sets an agenda of unfinished business that is for me still, some ten years later, a work in progress: the ideas of cognitive mapping, of narrative, and of allegory.

As for postmodernism and postmodernity, unsurprisingly it is in the context of the arts that its questions are most extensively rehearsed: in the interview with Anders Stephanson (for an international journal of the visual arts, *Flash Art*) and in that with Michael Speaks (for the distinguished architectural journal *Assemblage*). Such questions, I believe, are very far from being exhausted, despite the rather facile consensus in some quarters that postmodernism is over (or ended with 9/11). But my theory always distinguished between the immediate stylistic features of postmodernism and the characteristics of the postmodern situation, in which a whole variety of social phenomena, such as the status of culture itself and the role of the

aesthetic, were modified beyond recognition. It is very hard to see how the latter could have come to an end without a different form of capitalism (or indeed some wholly different reorganization of the economic infrastructure) taking its place. As for postmodernism as an artistic movement or moment of some kind, I cannot particularly see that the features I enumerated twenty years ago have been superseded. What I refuse to admit in any case is the return of anything like an old-fashioned modernism, save in the form of its simulacrum; but on that *A Singular Modernity*, published later than most of these interviews, stakes out a position I would still strongly endorse.

With the comprehensive interview with Xudong Zhang we return to the question of Marxism and postmodernism, now encapsulated in the conception of “cultural studies” as an acknowledgment of the postmodern conflation of high and mass culture, as well as the Marxian commitment to the context and to history. I would now only want to correct the impression that I see myself as an authorized spokesperson for that form of cultural studies that has since been institutionalized as a university discipline in the United States. Perhaps I have as many second thoughts about disciplinary institutionalizations as I do about interviews: both smack a little too much of reification for my taste. And yet we can scarcely function without such institutions as a source of power and legitimation. This is, no doubt, yet another version of the standard complaint about what the academy does to everything it assimilates; yet the question about cultural studies also includes the unresolved concern for the future of critical thinking generally, as well as an anxiety about the immediate future of literature as such and its effectivity.

In the final interview with Srinivas Aravamudan and Ranjana Khanna—the one most nearly contemporaneous with the publication of this book itself—I have welcomed the chance to reformulate the older themes of these exchanges in terms of the new situation of globalization, which I now understand to be the same as postmodernity, or if you prefer, to be the latter’s other, infrastructural face. The fact of globalization—its release of explosive new forces, the appalling new clarity with which it reveals American power and American capitalism, its demand for a productive rethinking of all the old theories of “culture and society” and indeed of “Western civilization” itself—now inaugurates an exciting set of new intellectual tasks, and indeed for the reinvention of the vocation of the intellectual as such. It is good provisionally to end on such an exciting prospect.

I am deeply indebted to Ian Buchanan for all the work he has put into the collection of these ancient texts and their editing; this book would not exist without his enthusiasm and commitment. I must also thank Roland Boer, Peter Fitting, Koonyong Kim, Reynolds Smith, Ranjana Khanna, and Srinivas Aravamudan for their help and encouragement, as well as the original interviewers for their stimulation.

Durham, North Carolina

March 2006

Interview with Leonard Green, Jonathan Culler, and Richard Klein

GREEN: *What do you take to be the political significance of books like *Fables of Aggression* or *The Political Unconscious*? As a Marxist, do you see the main function of such works as critical and interpretative? I am thinking of Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach: "The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it." I am also thinking of a recent article by Terry Eagleton, in which he raises the following issue: "For the question irresistibly raised for the Marxist reader of Jameson is simply this: how is a Marxist-structuralist analysis of a minor novel of Balzac to help shake the foundations of capitalism?"*

JAMESON: Read carefully, Terry's question is not so much a critique addressed to my own work as such, as rather the expression of an anxiety which everyone working in the area of Marxist cultural studies must feel, particularly when it is a matter of studying the past. The anxiety is a significant one, which should be looked at in some detail.

It would be too facile (but not wrong) to return the compliment by replying that Balzac, of all writers, has a privileged and symbolic position in the traditional debates of Marxist aesthetics: so that to propose a new reading of Balzac is to modify *those* debates (symbolically much more central in Marxism than in other ones, and involving political and epistemological consequences which it might be best to spell out more substantively in my response to your second question). So one type of political consequence that emerges from work like this can be located within Marxism, as part of