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Compte-rendu/Review

FREDERIC JAMESON. ***The Antinomies of Realism***. London and New York : Verso, 2013. 326 pp.

The "historic emergence of the bourgeois body" is the ultimate fact that explains the evolution of the realist novel. That literary form strives to restore feeling that has hardened into systems of named emotions and commercial genres. Yet realism seeks an everyday whose static ontology inhibits radically new possibilities from opening. Jameson introduces a new antinomy to probe this dialectical tension at the heart of the realist novel form : tale (*récit*) versus affect (scene). The Introduction and first two chapters explicate these two incommensurable temporalities and hash out issues of naming. "Affect" panders to that so-named wave of contemporary scholarship without concentrating on the subject. Here he means embodied feelings as opposed to reified 'named emotions'. The realist novel emerges as a new apparatus for registering the nuance of the modern sensorium, comparable to Wagner's chromaticism. Shifts from allegory to observation, from hero to multiple minor characters, and from villain to bad faith (*mauvaise foi*) all relate to a bourgeois body whose being-in-the-world is constituted primarily through *Stimmung* or affect.

The book focuses on four writers in realism's second phase : Zola, Tolstoy, Galdós, and Eliot. Flaubert marks a break from Walter Scott's original form, but it is Zola whose naturalist model could be widely imitated. Overwhelming lists of details and the sliding point of view in *Le Ventre de Paris* liberates sensory material and bodies from name and character. Tolstoy's "practice of affect" accounts for his fascination with multiple characters and his striving for the scenic present, even in *War and Peace*, whose episodic structure and gratuitous scenes resist a driving plot. Pérez Galdós epitomizes the shift from protagonist to

minor character, where the affect of accent and dialogue prevails over identification and drama. Meanwhile George Eliot's *Romola* dispenses with a true villain and the old ethical binary of good and evil. For certain characters multiple guilty motives veil each other from self-awareness, illustrating perfectly Sartre's theory of *mauvaise foi*.

Jameson adds two chapters that rethink genre and free indirect discourse in realism. He identifies four sub-genres (*Bildungsroman*, historical, adultery, naturalist novel), and asserts that the naturalist novel's trajectory of decline and failure expresses bourgeois anxiety over its own hegemony. The main point is that realism belongs to a reifying cycle of genres, and can be understood as this process more than as a particular set of conventions. It grew a new hybrid form upon stale genres like the romance or the letter novel, bearing the fresh fruit of the everyday; until these new models eventually rotted into flat gray ash that fertilized modernism, and possibly something new. One part of realism's process is the 'swelling' of the third person with multiple subjectivities. Free indirect discourse dissolves the stable storyteller's point of view in parallel with the decline of classical protagonists and melodramatic plots. Faulkner inaugurates a third phase of realism with mysterious pronoun usage and *in medias res* structures, which disguise the scenic present as *récit*. All realist forms invent new ways to synthesize tale and affect, but this process of reification has progressively drained affect from literature. The 20th century initiates a third phase with an 'existential novel' type that eventually devolves from stream of consciousness into stream of stuff, becoming a facile mass cultural form churned out by MFA programs. A coda posits the postmodern afterlife of realism in Alexander Kluge, whose tales respond to the decline of expressiveness by an intentional void of affect around a skeleton of pure *récit*.

The book's second part ruminates on the providential happy ending, war, and the historical novel today. (Ostensibly these 'material' elements have a logic that depends upon the formal antinomies covered in the first part, but the subjects are treated in the same manner.) Realism's commitment to the density of *what is* forecloses the possibility of salvation by providence, except for the tendency (identified by Lukács) to reveal transformations within the immanent realm. Jameson here points to Altman's *Short Cuts* (1993) as a late capitalist model for collective salvation. Jameson's in-depth film commentary pays dividends on film theory concepts and media comparisons that pepper the entire book. A brief chapter on war mostly notes the impossibility of representing it, from Stendhal's Waterloo to the nuclear age. The complex issue of the historical novel finds a contemporary exemplar in Hilary Mantel's *Place of Greater Safety*, which recovers the believability of Robespierre as a character. Reflection on the possible representation of a historical event greater than individual agents looks at Tolstoy, at names unmoored from their referents as in Dos Passos' Henry Ford, and at science's fictional folds in *Inception* (Nolan 2010) and *Cloud Atlas* (Wachowski, Wachowski

and Tykwer 2012). That last story reveals our ideological games and delivers a historical future retroactively. Jameson concludes with a general statement worth quoting :

> The aestheticians return again and again to the problem of the extra-artistic and referential dimensions of art, in its shabby ideological messages and its altogether insufficient and pitiful calls to this or that action, this or that indignation or "call to arms" (as Lu Xun put it), that or that coming to consciousness. But the moment of the aesthetic is not that call but rather its reminder that all those impulses exist : the revolutionary Utopian one full as much as the immense disgust with human evil, Brecht's "temptation of the good," the will to escape and to be free, the delight in craftsmanship and production, the implacably satiric, unremittingly skeptical gaze. Art has no function but to reawaken all these differences at once in an ephemeral instant; and the historical novel no function save to resurrect for one more brief moment their multitudinous coexistence in History itself (312-313).

Jameson's post/structuralist argument is far less straightforward than depicted above. A series of sketches wends from one idea to another, addressing Sartre's phenomenology with the same freewheeling and deft brush that comments on a minor character detail in Dickens. Such a French style assumes the reader's *Khâgne*-level literacy; it aims to flatter, entertain, and reveal deeper affinities by reshuffling the canon. However the neophyte will find none of Auerbach's pedagogical simplicity, and successive pages may compound an implicitly condescending confusion until she is less certain of what she didn't know to begin with. At the heart of the book is the instability of the dialectic – a force that softens the hard edges of received ideas and imagines new sets, without laying any firm new foundations. That may seem an obvious and superficial judgment for this reviewer to make. Jameson's supple way of thinking counts as much as any conclusions he draws about Eliot's ethics or a particular sub-genre.

Beyond style, the book's key premises belong to Sartre, Russian Formalism, and familiar post-1945 comparatists including Barthes and Fried. Relevant concepts (always in binary pairs) inform the discussion and trace its roots, without applying any severe pressure to the old paradigm. Jameson operates so confidently within the field of literary criticism and continental theory that no serious antagonists can occupy his attention. Yet the scale of his subject demands more than a stimulating promenade of cases, which risk begging the question. Namely, this reviewer winced at the repeated treatment of religion as mere superstition and mind trick, and the implied disdain for mass culture and commerce. One also grows skeptical of a literary history profiled as a cycle of forms driven by singular art novelists, whose innovative forms have the stability and universality to shape collective experience. Other foundational claims that remain mostly-buried include the Saussurean sign concept, the dualism of meaning and affect, a narrow Platonist understanding of transcendence, Marxist theories of class and of history, and the semiotic square. The speculative range of the text warrants

more discussion. Surely he addresses these basic ideas elsewhere, but their absence here leaves something less than the grand monograph promised by the bold title.

Antinomies is the third volume in a sequence entitled *The Poetics of Social Forms*. In his response to a 'tank' of critical reviews for nonsite issue #11, Jameson indicated that the subsequent volume will focus on allegory, while this one meant to concentrate on affect. In that response he says "the emotions form a kind of semiotic system (like colors for the anthropologist), and they are reified by way of their names". One can thus observe his repeated revelation of differential discourse systems at various levels of experience and form, intersected by opposing tendencies to structure and to reconfigure. The relation of this revelatory mode of thought to ethics seems no more direct than the art-for-art's sake estheticism that Sartre, Barthes, and Jameson routinely criticize. They see estheticism as closed, but their alternative seems equally opaque.

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