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Fredric Jameson, *The Modernist Papers*. New York: Verso, 2007. 160 pp. ISBN 9781844670963.

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Zero Figurality, or Imperialism and Form

The controversies around the work of Fredric Jameson will, at least for the time being, rest on the fault lines of a politics of Time itself. Only the future will decide if the incorporation of postmodern currents into the legacy of the Hegelian dialectic will have potentiated the final Negation, actualizing a post-capitalist Utopia; or if, on the contrary, the postmodern merely bogs down the legacy of Revolution in the unending sameness of a rhetoric of difference and deferral, unwittingly clearing the way toward the end times of humanity as such. In the meantime, Jameson's wager that Marxism needs to absorb the postmodern has illuminated, with characteristic flash, tenebrous spheres of the cultures of capitalism—like a brisk lightning storm across the dusky Great Plains. For instance, only a society which has forgotten how to narrate and has thus lost all sense of historical becoming could be as captivated as our own today by messianism and apocalypticism. The only solution imaginable is deliverance from Time itself. (Most strikingly symptomatic of the waning of the historical *Weltanschauung* of classical bourgeois culture, Jameson has argued consistently, has been the slow erosion of narrativity in dominant strains of the post-sixties neo-liberal dispensation.[1]) The perpetuated postmodern present makes one eventually wonder about what this present was like when it was all New, and not just mere novelty. Such a question concerning the momentous break in our past becomes by its sheer logical force the potential reviver of Futurity.

The momentous historical break in question is, of course, modernity. Jameson has turned recently to reconceptualizing that ever-vanishing transitional moment between the time when the grinding logic of capital accumulation just began to pick up its inexorable rhythm and when such savage Music successfully penetrated the Unconscious and reconstituted Nature. The total elimination of peasant life has always signified for Jameson the vanishing of traditional categories such as Subject and Object. The insight that the distinctions between the cultural and the economic were destabilized by the new consumer society meant that antagonistic *Auseinandersetzungen* with the likes of structural semiotics, Heideggerian destructions of representation, and DeManian allegoresis would be inevitable if one wanted to sound the experiential consequences of the postmodern condition. Thus it is usually from the far postmodern horizon that Jameson formalizes his thought in relatively recent works such as *A Singular Modernity*, for which, Jameson writes, *The Modernist Papers* may be taken "as a kind of source book" (x). This source book, more rambling, refractory and episodic in its set of *dérives*—ventures for local knowledge, as it were, at major stops on the canonical map of Modernism—demonstrates just how experimental Jameson's thinking is within the socio-historical hermeneutics that goes by the name of Marxism in the American academy. *The Modernist Papers* reads like a tour through the laboratory of a wickedly frenetic cultural analyst. Jameson has left behind fossil-like remains—readings in the negative—of a monumental literary past, scraps discarded for sharper, more encompassing theoretical formulations. The essays, covering diverse figures across the Euro-American sphere such as Thomas Mann, William Carlos Williams, Franz Kafka, Gertrude Stein, James Joyce and Stéphane Mallarmé (with occasional

shout-outs to Japanese masters like Natsume Soseki) serve as provocations to speculate on the larger historical picture. "Such extreme language experiments" as avant-garde or elitist poetry, he writes, "have themselves much to tell us about the historical possibilities that one would not have been able to read off other kinds of texts" (210). Modernism is translational, encoding strange pressures emanating from a foreign land, fomenting aesthetic illuminations of realities beyond mere appearances through the employment of new technologies, allegorizing the human exploration of the borderlands between freedom and necessity, historical possibility and thwarted desires. Ultimately Modernism will amount, as we will see, to a haphazard collective subject's exploration of its organic forms through a process of discovery, with each advance along the way allowing this new Subject to cut temporarily against necessary illusions and come to recognize itself as Absolute.

Indexed by the papers collected here, then, is the vastness that cannot be contained by Modernism itself, let alone a set of critical essays on it, but which modernist high points allow readers to intuit. Jameson's overarching discovery in these readings is the repressed presence of the imperial domains breaking through into the new experimental forms of Modernism. The historical and geographical contours he traces around Modernism in these files bring into relief all that is abstracted, distorted, or ignored by this major phenomenon—all that lies beyond its internal limits, beyond the views validated by literary study and its established canons, beyond Western languages, beyond the West itself. The question is: Which dimension of that ontology of modernity can possibly be given scope within the specific constellation of Western literary Modernism, and which dimensions of this imperial Being are rendered illegible by a predominantly Western focus? What exactly are the consequences of the category of imperialism for the study of canonical literature—and vice-versa? Does literary study become disciplined to the degree that such questions of imperial power become separated, with the result being that the disciplined study of Modernism further renders illegible the imperial relation, becoming itself just another specialized field of learning? Close reading leading to closed reading: such would be the consequence of the predominant ideology of Modernism in practice. Cleaving to the vaunted "autonomy of the aesthetic" has the possible effect of segmenting oneself, let alone one's object, from seemingly "extrinsic" social and political underpinnings. The latter would be akin to what economists generally call "externalities" today. Thus, the oft-posed question: What to do with literary studies today?

Jameson's example and explicit exhortations—"Always historicize!" being his most famous, of course—mitigate against such stultifying tendencies. But to his possible chagrin, the same imperative to contextualize historically could be applied to his work as much as to anything else. The most appropriate way for his comrades to greet the end of his long illustrious career would be to inventory stoically all his historical limitations and to soberly assess his legacy for posterity. Instead of making some premature pronouncement or pontificating about what are in fact Jameson's intellectually courageous violations of polite codes or the party line, I will merely read his occasional meanderings on the modernist landscape against the grain of his penchant for postmodern formulations. Across his essays and implicit in various interpretive gestures, on account of repetition and reappearance in disparate decodings, a specific, historically determinate, and dialectically charged constellation of concepts emerges. This constellation illuminates the atmospherics of modernity, gives expression to Jameson's modernist side, and bears witness to his deft repositioning of the dialectic. The constellation that appears through his

readings, captured by five recurring terms—Reification, Sublimity, Absolute, Epic, and Totality—puts into motion the internal dynamic of Modernism and highlights its shifting conditions of possibility. His free interweaving of modernist and postmodernist modes of subjectivity allows for their tensions to be released in creative ways. Here we sense some truth in the effortless configurations of formalist approaches within Marxist categories and vice-versa. The Marxist concepts become more elaborate, expansive, and, as it were, energized, while the formalist ones reveal themselves cured of their previous lameness, whence they were too handicapped for what they sought to grasp, too ideologically closed to unleash the truth-content of the historical situation. Occasionally in *The Modernist Papers*, it is as if what Benjamin once conjectured comes to life: "Die Wahrheit ist ein aus Ideen gebildetes intentionsloses Sein"—"Truth is intentionless Being, built out of ideas." [2] One must brush Jameson against his own historical situation in order to glimpse the constellational pattern that occasionally shines unintentionally through his modernist musings.

Modernist works exemplify for Jameson the strategic practices of "dereification." In terms of the body and the senses, dereification amounts to "showing how the fragmentation of the various physical senses from one another also provided the modernist artist with so many sealed compartments (the pure eye, the pure ear, even some 'pure' linguistic apparatus) in which to restore unity in a purely symbolic fashion" (241). For Proust, this compensatory symbolization means that the autonomization of language "is secured by the systematic refusal of expression as such, as well as the strategic exploitation of all those features and dimensions of language susceptible of being abstracted from the normal operations of human expression and communication, human meaning, and of being potentiated as though each could somehow prolong its existence under its own power alone" (191). For Joyce, dereification involves radical depersonalization, securing "the existence of the text as a kind of free-floating and autonomous totality" (182). What results is the classical modernist foregrounding of the medium in its materiality à la Clement Greenberg, but in this case as a way of recapturing a kind of unity that has been lost through the multiplication of bureaucratic categories, the compartmentalization of the *Lebenswelt* into autonomous spheres, or simply, reification: the petrification of the accumulation process as hard, apparently immutable objectivity. The sheer material binding together of printed matter into the unified form of the book is the blunt materialist-dialectical overcoming of the usual fragmentary and errant nature of Modernist *auto-écriture*. This uninspiring unity of the medium corresponds to the most boring and most unread parts of such Epic tomes as *Ulysses*, where dereification is ultimately accomplished through the presentation of utter boredom, which undoubtedly, yet masterfully, bores. Dereification, in adopting such ontologically provocative methods, calls into question the entire objective world produced by concerted collective (though immediately individual and particularistic) effort. It provokes questions such as those existential ones that Jameson recaptures: "Is a non-narrative relationship to the world and to Being possible?" "What kinds of lives are we leading and what kind of world are we living them in, if the objects that surround us are all somehow external, extrinsic, alienated from us?" and "How can the products of human labor have come to be felt as meaningless or contingent?" (150)

The aesthetics of dereification—however ontologically gnawing, disturbing, or burdensome their results—were tied in logically affinitive, if not determinate, ways with the other points of his interpretive constellation. The strategies for dereification which are central to Modernism as a

whole, such as that of exemplifying—if not provoking—profound boredom, redound ultimately upon the ontology of the Sublime. For is not that state in which the bored one finds oneself, utterly bereft of the everyday temporal flow which normally informs one's activities, thereby reduced to that angst that inevitably characterizes the reunion of one's human being with one's animal existence, where the profoundest of questions are reciprocated by the largest of aporias—is not this state at the core of sublimity? The relationship between such evocations of the Sublime and the nature of Modernism as a whole receive consistent yet somewhat dispersed treatment in Jameson's essays. Considering how original some of his insights about the Sublime are, and how central this phenomenon seems to be to Modernism as a whole, it is worth reconstructing his contributions to the predominantly modern tradition of reconfiguring the Sublime in new forms, media, and sensibilities.

As already implied, dereification is closely tied to the evocation of a mysterious, elusive, yet overpowering force that reduces the individual to a feeling of helplessness, individuated terror, profound boredom or some other ontologically marginalized state such that the normal responses or evasions of such an abyssal condition are rendered inadequate and new forms are necessitated in their wake. Returning to the older traditional texture of everyday life was no longer an option in modernity, though the waning of traditional life left an aura that was stronger in its allure than the thing itself. Modernist evocations of the Sublime often demonstrated how outmoded the older religious metaphysical consolations had become vis-à-vis such a technologically mediated sensorium. For instance, the vague consolations of posthumous rewards must have seemed utterly shallow in an expanding universe of creature comforts. To ignore the dangers and disturbances of the new imperial capitalist dispensation became an unimaginable luxury. Whereas an earlier Kantian age had construed the Sublime as the source of one's moral nature, giving one power to overcome the nature within us and a sense of superiority above the nature outside us—insofar as moral ideas exceeded one's representational equipment—Modernism is less sanguine about the old moral energies and their underlying values. Despite the concerted focus on recovering a sense of the Absolute—generally for symbolic self-satisfaction—Modernism does not seek so much to revitalize the religiosity of old as to absorb and thereby overcome it. This amounts to evoking the usual awe and angst, but the evocations of wondrous, yet rapidly depleting, nature are now no longer required. Jameson's efforts over the decades that it took to amass these essays reveal themselves to be in many ways a dogged tracking of the shifts, sources, and valences of the Sublime. From the vantage point of the postmodern disappearance of affect, where "Nietzschean Dionysiac intoxication . . . has become as banal and institutionalized as your local disco or the thrill with which you buy a new-model car," some exertion is required to imagine the force of the Novum to which Modernism became a promethean response (235).

The visible expression of the suprapersonal mode of production in which we live is the mechanical, the artificial, the machine; and we have only to remember the "sublime" of yesterday, the exhilaration of the Futurists before the machine proper—the motorcar, the steamship liner, the machine gun, the airplane—to find some initial contemporary equivalent of the phenomenon Burke first described. (236)

Whereas Kant's Sublime was predicated upon the appearance of nature to men "as [a] completely alien, all-powerful and unassailable force, with which men's relations are purely animal and by

which they are overawed like beasts," [3] in modern times the entire dispensation of imperial capitalism—that is, the urban realm and its technologies—may as well substitute for nature. The force of this most striking stage of capitalist development works every bit as vehemently, disastrously, and inscrutably as nature—perhaps even more so considering how much of its energies are absorbed or unleashed beyond the immediate space of coherent representation within any particular location of the capitalist imperium. Perhaps the most scintillating and insightful of Jameson's musings on the Sublime in all its various historical manifestations is that it must struggle to find its own image. It cannot rely, like some *deus ex machina*, on past constructions. For Jameson, what the new Sublime evocation symbolizes is the newly assembled motley collective brought on board the imperial ship as conscripts and captives. The gods of yesteryear are eclipsed by this new worldly assemblage, to which Kafka's "truly epic structure" gives voice. For in Kafka's narrative universe, as Jameson acutely recognizes, "the only viable partner of the lone named individual is the collective itself, the tribe, the people" (110). The movement of dereification only had to go so far before the social illusions that capital penetration makes necessary—the rational self-contained individual of the market—could be challenged by the deeper, more subdued and shadowy social realities disclosed by modernist shamans like Kafka.

The brash experimental drive allowed for the collective unconscious of the imperial capitalist order to surface sublimely, even if coincidentally, in a variety of instances across Modernism. But such moments revealed to the practitioner the power of her own activity and the independence by which she could attain its wonders. The self-conscious high modernist Creator-Gods could find satisfaction in the seemingly endless possibilities of generating content from literary form—the story about writing, for instance; or form from literary content—the derivation of non-narrative as a means for dereification, for example. Through her abilities to evoke the Sublime and through her own experimental practices, the modernist had discovered the very generative power of autonomy within—like the goddess Aindri of the Hindu pantheon beholding her phenomenal self as a thunderbolt. [4] Jameson's incisive analyses of the divergent paths that the modernist Absolute took over the course of the last century—as the source for artistic/political praxis, on the one hand, and as self-deluding ideology/myth, on the other—represent perhaps his most timely contribution to the study of Modernism. In essence the story that emerges in dispersed fashion in *The Modernist Papers* (but in sharp polemical thrust in *A Singular Modernity*) is one in which the search to replace the religiosity of old with the self-evident instantiations of the Absolute in Art gave the new modernists an especially sharp edge in pushing further the possibilities of the future. Pointing to a genuine Absolute as the grounds for their politics, modernists spanning the political spectrum from T.S. Eliot to Bertolt Brecht, created a vision of total social transformation. The Terror unleashed by the practice of evoking the Absolute by exemplifying it in making art about art opened up many risks: everything could be destroyed and created afresh, for art was just a metaphor for the new objectivity as a whole. The underlying purpose of the utility embedded in the society could be questioned. It was the ironic task of post-war ideologies of Modernism (such as Greenberg's) to contain these risks. The supreme value conferred by the ideology of Modernism on the autonomy of the aesthetic was meant to purify it of all those matters deemed extrinsic and thus sully. These so-called extrinsic matters were the very points of reference for the older avant-gardes, for whom aesthetic autonomy was the vehicle for their politics (of whatever kind), and their politics the expression of their commitment to the Absolute (however manifested). As Jameson is all too aware, the

bifurcation of Modernism along the diverging lines of political praxis and academic ideology would internally cleave the Totality of postwar society, and have consequences that I take up in the conclusion.

The burning utopian desire of Modernism, pure and simple, attained expression in the Absolute. What else could better express the desire for the harmony of means and ends than the identity of form and content and the coincidence of theory and practice? What else could better represent the Sublime power of creation than the distillation of the most deeply intrinsic, the fundamental essence, symbolized by the medium itself? Jameson sees in the celebration of art as Language a central praxis defined by "the great Utopian idea of purification of language, a recreation of its deeper communal or collective function, a purging of everything instrumental or commercial in it" (8). The intersection with aesthetic patterns of dereification is patent enough now as it was then. The attention placed on language as the primal source of artistic meaning results in some very significant reversals. The shift is one from words being the means for the allegory of things (such as the rawness of historical transformation) to things becoming the allegory of already existing discourses around such things. "Was there not," Gertrude Stein pondered, "a way of naming things that would not invent names, but mean names without naming them?" (353) Or think of William Carlos Williams's imperative: "Say it! No ideas but in things." Or: "Compose (not ideas. / But in things. Invent! / Saxifrage is my flower that splits / the rocks."

This brings us to the penultimate point of the mutually determining terms of our constellation: the Epic. As a genre designation, this may seem a most unlikely suspect for the modernist moment, being so redolent of some long lost originary time. Yet it is the most recurring genre term in the orbit of Jameson's technical lexicon. If one has grasped the interrelations between the other points of the constellation, it is not difficult to surmise how the Epic made sense for Modernism. What Jameson seems to be suggesting (though never quite stating) in his encounters with the Epic form in Modernism is that it became the best mode of expression for the new promethean behemoth that had arisen within the new sensorium of imperial capitalism: the newly forged yet far-flung motley collective. Having come to some half-muted consciousness of itself as the original agent for the half-dead object world surrounding it, and conscious as well of its internal capacity to generate from within an entirely different world of objects and subjects, this total giant that had begun to know itself as Modernism required a language that would be as original as the original names of the *Ursprache*. This language is nothing other than that of zero-figurality: making a literal image stand for a figure: a second order of things as not merely things, but as signs for older figures, which themselves refer to older, more natural, realities. Through this new literalization of old figures—something like the representation of classical gods waning like flowers as a way to capture the figure of their slow historical eclipse—"the figure is now not undermined as a mystification, but rather foregrounded in its essential structure qua historical fact as such, where it continues a different kind of existence, one that does not imply the existence, alongside the figure, of literal or prosaic, exact representation, but rather the permanence and inescapability of figuration itself" (16). The brute constructed objectivity that was becoming second nature—like figuration—is not the only thing that is being named in this Epic idiom. Encompassing it completely within a second order figurality means that this hard reality can be transformed afresh, reclaimed, and made the basis of ever more radical praxis of *Aufhebungen*. The new radicality inevitably puts back into play the repetition of the original Epic moment, in which, as Benjamin might put it, the original naming of things was accomplished.

The modern naming—and purposeful manipulation—of the figures that were thus invented is the symbolization of an unconscious collective desire to wrest control of the second nature of the imperial sensorium, to transform it into an agency of self-consciousness.

Contrary to the usual maxim, then, the modernists, like the ancients, had no precedent for the situation they inherited. Repeated paradoxically as a gesture to capture the newness of the imperial order of things, the Epic was an especially apt mode for disclosing the deep contradictions of the Totality. The Epic embodied a variety of flows and counterflows: though it had its formal specificities, it was the form meant to encompass other forms; though associated with singular names such as Eliot or Pound, it was the vehicle for subaltern collective expression. Though often miniaturized, its gestures were grand enough to make the behemoth of the new collective subject appear unmistakably. Though a recent renovation, the Epic displayed a deep distrust of modernity as a whole. By giving form to these points and counterpoints, the Epic seemed especially good at encompassing the contradictory forces making up the social Totality. It brought out the possibility of holding together what appeared to be an internally fissiparous social dynamic characterized as the proliferation of distinct languages, system rationalities, and observer positions, with Modernism being but one of the many that sought, however dubiously and ideologically, to autonomize and absolutize itself. Within the Western sphere of Modernism, what this dynamic amounts to is an almost complete "dépossession du monde" of the colonized peoples. The consequence of such spatial disjunction is "the inability to grasp the way the system functions as a whole" (157).

Its effects are representational effects, which is to say a systematic block on any adequate consciousness of the structure of the imperial system: but these are just as clearly objective effects and will have their most obvious consequences in the aesthetic realm, where the mapping of the new imperial world system becomes impossible, since the colonized other who is its essential other component or opposite number has become invisible. (156)

Now that the internal limitations of the content, if not indeed some of the forms, of Modernism have been made apparent, what chance is there that these could be viewed from the colonial angle? On the one hand, it is not lost on Jameson that what is required is a departure from the canonical cages and ideological traps of Modernism as a whole: "We need to train ourselves to be vulnerable in some new and original sense, to be passive-receptive, weak, un-American, susceptible to boundless influence by currents from foreign countries and distant cultures" (293). Yet, on the other hand, he seems assured that in the colonial domain "the mapping of the imperialist world system remains structurally incomplete, for the colonial subject will be unable to register the peculiar transformations of First World or metropolitan life which accompany the imperial relationship" (164). If one remains confined within the sheltered chambers of Greenbergian Modernism, one certainly would never know if this assumption about the inabilities of the colonized to map the imperial system is true or merely an unwarranted prejudice backed by the institutional powers of authoritative knowledge. If it is true, what makes it so? The skills to address such issues rarely, if ever, have to be cultivated within the established structures of canonical literary study, which suffers accordingly when it comes to grasping its own object within the Totality. Is it not possible that such disciplined inability to grasp the far extreme of imperial Being coincides all too often with the denial of Futurity *in toto*?

Notes

[1] For a contemporarily relevant discussion of the politics of temporality, see Christopher Connery, "The End of the Sixties," *boundary 2* 36.1 (2009): 183-210.

[2] Walter Benjamin, *Aura und Reflexion: Schriften zur Kunsttheorie und Aesthetik*, eds. Hartmut Boehme and Yvonne Ehrenspeck (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2007): 141. For Benjamin in *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (Origin of German Tragic Drama), such ideas are not arbitrary. Rather they are the objective virtual arrangement of phenomena and necessarily the "objective Interpretation der Phaenomene." *Ibid.* 140.

[3] This is how Marx and Engels playfully put it in "The German Ideology." Robert C. Tucker (ed.), *The Marx-Engels Reader* (New York: Norton, 1978): 158.

[4] On the forms of the seven Shaktis (*saptashaktayah*), see David Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses: Vision of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Tradition* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1987), 156, *passim*.