

# Critique: The History of a Premise

by PATRICK FESSENBECKER

Recently, much has been made of the fact that “critique,” as practiced in literary criticism, is an attitude. As Eve Sedgwick famously put it, it is “paranoid,” in contrast with alternate approaches that seem “naive, pious, or complaisant” (Sedgwick 126). Similarly, Steven Best and Sharon Marcus have noted that it is “suspicious,” looking “past the surface in order to root out what is underneath it” (Best and Marcus 18). But critique is also an argument, and I want to pause to think about the nature of that argument.

Critique in literary criticism comes from many sources, but one of the most influential was Fredric Jameson’s *The Political Unconscious*, which offered an innovative account of the connection between aesthetic structure and social context. In particular, Jameson developed the following premise: “the individual narrative, or the individual formal structure, is to be grasped as the imaginary resolution of a real contradiction” (77). In other words, although a text might not mention any particular “real contradiction,” its *formal* properties might still have a political function. He borrows as a model Levi-Strauss’s analysis of the body painting of the Caduveo Indians: lacking political institutions capable of resolving their social problems, “unable to conceptualize or to live [a] solution directly, they began to dream it, to project it into the imaginary” of the images on their bodies (78).

To draw out two implications of this way of thinking of aesthetic structure, it’s worth emphasizing the peculiarity and complexity of the relationship Jameson sees between the “real contradiction” and literary form: he is not saying that authors reflectively consider their problems. First of all, the author is not aware of the contradiction she is addressing; correspondingly, the political problem need not be addressed directly in the literary work. Rather, the contradiction is “an absent cause, which cannot be directly or immediately conceptualized by the text” (82). This is of course the sense in which Jameson is discussing a political *unconscious*. Second, and consequently, the relationship between the contradiction and the formal structure is nothing so simple as the relationship between cause and effect (26). So if the relationship is not causal, then what exactly is it?

Jameson describes it in two slightly different ways. Initially, as part of the extended engagement with Marxist thought that opens the book, he adapts Louis Althusser’s concept of “structural causality.” In contrast to “expressive causality,” which identifies the level of culture as an expression of some other level of society, “structural causality” insists upon the differences between levels, and on relating them on the basis of these differences. Later, however, Jameson speaks of the real contradictions as being among the “semantic conditions of possibility” for a given text (57). He writes:

The relationship of the [...] historical situation to the text is not construed as causal (however that might be imagined), but rather as one of a limiting situation; the historical moment is here understood to block off or shut down a certain number of formal possibilities available before, and to open up determinate new ones [...] Thus, the *combinatoire* aims not at enumerating the “causes” of a given text or form, but rather at mapping out its objective, a priori conditions of possibility (148).

Thus Jameson moves even further away from the notion of causation: the contention is that certain literary forms have necessary, “a priori” historical conditions, and it is possible to see that necessity through proper consideration of the “historical moment” when the text appeared.

This break from causation was liberating for literary critics, who now had a theoretical apparatus justifying the relevance of social and political problems to literary analysis in situations where a text’s content or author’s biography did not involve those problem directly. In an offhand remark, Jameson dismisses the insistence on a strong model of causality as part of the problem a political criticism needs to overcome: “causality, *long the scarecrow used to frighten people away from social mediations of this kind*, [is] only one of the possible relations that can obtain between” aesthetic structure and social-political reality (226, emphasis mine). And without the scarecrow, subsequent critics have been creative in considering such “social mediations.” To mention a few examples, critics have argued that the disintegration of the Roman Republic was a necessary condition for Latin love elegies; that the oppressive nature of the 1970’s Argentinian dictatorship was a pre-condition for Argentine writers’ uses of meta-fiction; and that the French Revolution was necessary for the rise of the realist novel (Miller 14; Colas 123; Moretti 40).

But it is not quite clear to me whether one can give a coherent account of Jameson’s “conditions of possibility.” The mix of Kantian terminology with an emphasis on history suggests the influence of Michel Foucault’s “historical a priori,” but Foucault had in mind the conditions for a given claim to have the status of scientific validity, not the conditions for particular aesthetic forms, and the analogy between the two is not an obvious one (127). Moreover, it is not clear to me whether it is possible to meet, for the interpretation of any given text, the scholarly burden this demonstration of necessity imposes. So I want now to raise a few questions about the assumption that the social conditions in which texts are written are “absent causes” and conditions of possibility for their formal features.

Consider, as a brief example of a connection between literary form and real contradiction, Jameson’s description of the transition from the medieval form of the French epic poems, known as *chansons de geste*, to the “romance.” His contention is that when the feudal nobility becomes aware of itself as a class, a contradiction arises. On the one hand, there is a “positional notion of good and evil,” associated with the *chanson de geste*, whereby I posit myself as good and those unlike me as evil. On the other hand, an “emergent class solidarity” leads me to identify myself with an ideology and a broader set of behaviors. This duality allows for the possibility that a

member of my class might still be an “other,” and therefore evil, the embodiment of a contradiction that gives rise to a new aesthetic form:

Romance in its original strong form may then be understood as an imaginary “solution” to this real contradiction, a symbolic answer to the perplexing question of how my enemy can be thought of as being *evil* (that is, as other than myself and marked by some absolute difference), when what is responsible for his being so characterized is quite simply the *identity* of his own conduct with mine [...] Romance “solves” this conceptual dilemma by producing a new kind of narrative [...] The hostile knight, in armor, his identity unknown, exudes that insolence which marks a fundamental refusal of recognition and stamps as the bearer of the category of evil, up to the moment when, defeated and unmasked, he ask for mercy by *telling his name* (118-119, emphasis in original).

The question I want to ask is this: if we grant him all his claims, has Jameson has shown not merely that this account is plausible, but that the contradiction is a necessary, “a priori” condition of the form of the romance? After all, Jameson is not attempting to demonstrate the relevance of the social condition through a causal account, of how particular writers made particular decisions. Rather, he is attempting to derive the political conditions that must precede a given form.

And it seems to me that Jameson’s argument—that a conflict between two ways of thinking about moral identity in the twelfth century gave rise to the form of the romance—does not show such necessity. First, two counterexamples: it would seem that there have been a number of moments where social classes developed a self-awareness in such a way that did not produce this form. One might think of the rise of the imperial industrialists of the Gilded Age at the end of the nineteenth century, a phenomenon of which Jameson gives a very different account. Conversely, it would seem too that this literary form has existed at moments not dominated by the rise of a new class developing consciousness of itself. The formal structure given here is one of an enemy who is unknown, but who is revealed at the end of the story to be in fact identical to the hero; *Star Wars* comes to mind as a recent example of a very similar structure.

Even if one is not persuaded by these counterexamples, moreover, it’s not clear that one can demonstrate necessity through the correlation of historical events with particular literary forms: after all, correlation does not prove causation, much less necessity. In other words, even if it were true that every society in which a class developed a self-consciousness in opposition to a positional morality produced a form of the sort Jameson describes, it’s still not clear this would demonstrate that such forms could not have existed without such changes: there remains the possibility that the cause of the formal shift derives from other factors entirely. And this worry is all the more pressing when—as is this case here—there is only one example. The burden of showing that some situation really is a necessary condition thus seems impossibly high, requiring not merely a nuanced history of a particular place and time, but also a broad comparison between it and other similar situations.

Now, Jameson addresses some of these worries. He refines his point about the rise of a social class into the claim that “the ultimate condition” of romance is “to be found in a transitional moment in which two distinct modes of production, or moments of socioeconomic development, coexist” (148). Additionally, he admits the survival of “late variants” of romance; these can be understood as “symbolic reactions to the stepped-up pace of social change in the late nineteenth-century French countryside (laicization and the *loi Combes*, electrification, industrialization” (148). And—as a colleague pointed out to me—Jameson has in fact written about *Star Wars*: he calls it a space opera, whose use of an older form exemplifies the nostalgia characteristic of postmodernism (“Postmodernism and Consumer Society” 197). But it is not clear how much these modifications help. Presumably it has very often been the case that two distinct modes of production have coexisted in some fashion: in a global economy, it would seem impossible for this to be false. So while this has the advantage of being a condition that obtains in all instances where the form of the romance was popular, it would seem to have been true as well of a number of societies that did not produce this particular form. And his attempt to deal with “late variants of romance” makes the view look unfalsifiable: if the coming of electricity in the nineteenth century or the postmodern condition at the end of the twentieth century can be necessary conditions of the form of the romance just as the rise of a feudal nobility could, then it begins to seem as if the thesis can be modified so that every romance, no matter when or where it occurs, offers further proof of Jameson’s claim. Since societies are always changing, it will always be possible to point to a social change concurrent with a change in literary form. But this concurrence cannot by itself be proof of a causal or conditional relationship.

While I think these questions lack answers, however, I don’t think I’m the first to worry about them. Subsequent developments in literary theory, by Jameson himself and by others sharing his premise, demonstrate the desire to make the connection between history and literary form more rigorous. To pick the most straightforward example, if “form” is “the abstract of social relations,” as Franco Moretti puts it, then it ought to be discernible through the close reading of one particular work, but broadly, in all or at least many of the texts written at the moment where those social relations obtain (157).<sup>[1]</sup> Thus, his turn to “distant reading” reflects a desire to refine the kind of historical formalist analysis Jameson advocates. So the real question I want to ask is this: if there are so many problems with the assumption that literary form represents an imaginative solution to real contradictions, then why do so many people find it so compelling? Why, in other words, do the problems seem both surmountable and worth surmounting?

I don’t know, and I would be interested in what others have to say on the matter. But I think we can get an interesting answer by turning the method on itself. Critique, after all, has a formal structure, so let us ask this: what is the real contradiction to which Jamesonian critique offers an imaginary resolution? What are the historical problems solved by the use of this style of critique?

If we keep in mind that *The Political Unconscious* was first published in 1981, one answer immediately comes to mind: a new justification for the formalist study of

literature. Many of the central texts that led to the opening of the canon and the rejection of New Critical methods of literary analysis appeared that year or soon after. *English Literature: Opening up the Canon* appeared in 1981; William Cain's *Crisis in Criticism Theory, Literature, and Reform in English Studies* appeared in 1984; and Jane Tompkins's *Sensational Designs* appeared in 1985.<sup>[2]</sup> This is to say that just while traditional literary practice was coming under heavy attack, Jameson's work offered a new kind of formalism that was sensitive to many of the political concerns motivating the attack in the first place.

This way of understanding the spread of Jamesonian critique gains some support from the complicated attitudes the "New Formalists" have taken towards his work. As Marjorie Levinson notes in her description of the movement, "Jameson is relentlessly held up as the good example" by such critics, even as they argue that historicist models are problematically "reductive" (40 n 10; 3). Presumably, he is "the good example" because his analyses are so formally nuanced, and if one assumes that an admiration for formalist criticism is not unique to the New Formalists, it becomes less surprising that Jameson's basic premise has gained such widespread acceptance. If I am correct that this is the problem it solves, then we have an answer as well to the question of what the text represses: namely, the aesthetic. The fact that Jamesonian critique is appealing precisely because it is so attentive to the formal properties of the texts it addresses is difficult to acknowledge, because the method was predicated on rejecting the traditional methods of literary formalism. As the preface to *The Political Unconscious* puts it, "the very absence" of the "traditional issues of philosophical aesthetics" from the book is "an implicit commentary on them," a silent argument for an "essentially historicist perspective" (11).

Given the methodological worries about this kind of argument with which I opened, this claim should probably be understood as a provocation, a hypothesis in need of further proof. By way of conclusion, however, we might imagine what a political criticism that did not depend on the premise of Jamesonian critique would look like. Some years ago, Jonathan Arac disagreed with Jameson's model of political criticism precisely because it dismissed the actual "political consciousness" in the thematic content of a text: as Arac puts it, Jameson "must hide the political in order to find it elsewhere" (279). Following Arac, then, perhaps the overt political thinking in a text offers a promising avenue. Critics have attended to the politics of literary form for much of the last generation. Perhaps the politics in literary content offer a path worth exploring in the future.

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[1] For Moretti’s explanation of his relationship to Jameson’s premise, see “The End of the Beginning: A Reply to Christopher Prendergast,” *Distant Reading* 137-158.

[2] I am guided to these texts and to this account by John Guillory’s discussion of the debate about the literary canon in *Cultural Capital*, pp 3-82.

It may be worth mentioning that Jameson would not quite accept my use of the method of critique, since I haven’t moved to the political or economic level of the society, and instead kept my account inside the discipline of English. This is quite intentional: while I lack space to give the enormously complex issue the attention it deserves, I’m inclined to disagree with Jameson’s key claim that “social reality is in its fundamental reality one and indivisible” (TPU 40). It’s this additional premise that justifies the interpretive move not merely to an underlying condition, but always to an economic/political condition. I’m inclined, however, to see various levels of society – like the academy – as allowing more autonomy than Jameson thinks they possess.