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Lateness in James and Jameson

By Daniel Moore, *University of Birmingham (UK)*

Over the last quarter-century, Jameson has been at once the timeliest *and most untimely* of American critics and writers.

—Benjamin Kunkel (12)

Why has Henry James's work persisted—and thrived—in every new iteration of critical thinking since his death a century ago? It's the kind of question that Fredric Jameson might ask, because Jameson's oeuvre is directed toward the spaces between aesthetics and politics, toward the related issues of periodization, realist representation, and historicity. Though Henry James has not been a subject of consistent attention in the critical works of Fredric Jameson, he remains an archetypal Jamesonian subject. The canonization of James as *the* great-man novelist and cultural figure of a period generally considered the high-water mark of the realist and psychological novel is scored by many of the prevailing political and cultural predispositions of twentieth and twenty-first century literary and cultural criticism. James as high-realist, James as modernist, James as stylist, James as psychologist, James as cultural critic, James as postmodernist—the ebb and flow of our critical positions on the oeuvre of James (in fact, an oeuvre probably reducible to half a dozen novels and no more than a dozen short stories and essays) says much about many of the concepts that Fredric Jameson has spent a career exploring: canonicity, cultural value, and the politics of aesthetics. James's position as a *global* writer too, a facet of his reception that received much needed recent critical attention in a 2003 issue of this journal, has helped to open up James's fiction and critical writing to the same interests that Jameson's own work has traced out over the course of the last decade or so. James's place as a writer concerned with global culture, with the place of the United States in the affairs of the rest of the world, with the marketplace and the conditions of literary and artistic production has only been cemented in the last few decades, and Jameson's attentiveness to the same

issues—and his abiding interest in the moment of literary realism—means that it is difficult to think of the multivalent James that has appeared in recent years without recourse to Jameson's work.

Yet, despite superficial compatibility, bringing James and Jameson into constellation is, I have found, an exercise fraught with difficulty. A first difficulty lies in Jameson's own oft-reiterated demand that we must always historicize. Telescoping James through the theoretical concerns of late twentieth- and early-twenty-first century criticism has led to all kinds of historical foreshortenings that might reinforce Jameson's own concerns about the loss of historicity in postmodernism. Recent work on James has marked out his critical writing, in particular, as a heterogeneous space that looks forward to the testing of limits of narrative, history, and cultural discourse that postmodernism enacts. Sheila Teahan remarks that the James that has emerged in this postmodern moment "either anticipates or contributed directly to critical formations as different as phenomenology, Russian Formalism, New Criticism, Anglo-American narrative theory, queer theory, and deconstruction" (11). Yet, coming to terms with the James who is so materially present in our own historical moment is to experience a weird double exposure: David McWhirter has written cogently in this journal about the pitfalls—as well as the benefits—of accommodating Henry James within, in Marc Bousquet's words, our own "actually existing social reality" (215). If the field of James studies has been enriched by the heterogeneity of postmodern critical discourse of all kinds, McWhirter (quoting Jameson) thinks it would be prudent

to contemplate the ways in which . . . James threatens to disappear into the "new depthlessness" of a culture in which historicity itself seems at times to vanish and where art and artist are absorbed, along with just about everything else, into the perpetual present of commodity production and consumption. (180)

A second difficulty is that both James and Jameson enact similar strategies of resistance to being formulated, sprawling on a pin. In neither man's writing are there ideas that stand firm as immutable principles. For James, a commitment to the infinite possibilities of artistic expression means, in practice, a wandering interest in philosophy, politics, economics, psychology, and religious feeling. Attempts to characterize James as a systematic thinker—a philosopher of art, no less—are often doomed to failure precisely because of his inveterate *interest* in every dimension, every glade, every nuance of human social life. For example, James's aestheticism, as any number of critics have shown since the publication of Jonathan Freedman's erudite *Professions of Taste* (1993), fails at all points to be systematic. And yet isn't his work all the richer for failing these tests? Later James resists systematization in the infinite shades of rhetorical tone and in the diffuse, obscure, and untranslatable style of works of fiction such as *The Ambassadors* or *The Golden Bowl*. In short, isn't this failure the source of much of our continuing interest in James the man and James the novelist?

A similar "failure" in style—which we might recast as a failure to be reducible—is demonstrated by Fredric Jameson. Jameson's Marxist position in his critique of late capitalism and globalization is a supple tool that never leads to a narrowing of the avenues of his cultural inquiry—Marxism is for Jameson, as Sean Homer suggests, "not so much a self-consistent, internally coherent, philosophical position, but rather

. . . a corrective to other forms of thought, as the de-idealization of bourgeois philosophy and theory” (5). This reflexivity allows Jameson to mobilize a non-reductive form of Marxist cultural critique that can encompass a wide range of critical insights, holding each in check as it moves fluidly across disciplines and national boundaries alike. The experience of the reader of Jameson shares much with the experience of the reader of late James—profound and enlivening but hard to distill. Critics, including Evan Watkins and Terry Eagleton, have illustrated Jameson’s style using a wide range of descriptors that all point to an evasive quality in his work. For Watkins, the distinguishing feature of Jameson’s historical criticism is its generality—“Jameson *generalizes*,” he says, “inveterately and persistently” (17). Eagleton finds that Jameson’s style “refutes definitive figuration and echoes in the mind simply as the rhetorical *verso* or buzz of inexhaustible implications of his grand narrative themes” (*Against* 66). More recently, in a wonderfully perceptive essay in *New Left Review* in 2009, Eagleton talks at length about the relationship of Jameson’s political content and his literary style, arguing that there is a symbiotic relationship between Jameson’s subjects and his stylistic flourishes.

If such language puts the reader in mind of critical responses to late James—the “refutation” of “definitive figuration,” the “echoes” and the “inexhaustible implications” could very easily be taken from any book, article, or essay on James’s late fiction in the last half-century—might we bring James and Jameson into constellation by thinking about the implications of this shared stylistic heritage? If Eagleton is correct to find in Jameson (and Jameson correct to find in James, as we’ll see) a deep connection between content and form, we might be able to extract new contexts for reading the work of both writers? To race out stylistic similarities, however, is to flaunt Jameson’s demand that we read historically. So, what I want to do in the short space that this article offers is to effect an historical short-circuit to suggest a rather more virtual than material historical connection between James and Jameson—that is, I want to suggest that a reading of both through a lens of lateness might shed light on the way in which form and content are reciprocally related in each’s work. James’s “lateness”—an atomized concept that simultaneously describes his style after 1900, the attitudes and moods of many of his most readily recognizable literary creations, and the perceived evasions and circumventions in his own biography—has for several decades been the fount of numerous disparate approaches to the life and to the work. Thus, it hardly needs restating that the works of fiction that James produced in the twentieth century have come to connote a lateness of style and a belatedness of action, with characters such as Lambert Strether, John Marcher, and Spencer Brydon functioning as shadowy reflections of the sublimations of James’s own consciousness. Using Theodor Adorno’s theoretical template for the concept here, I want to bring James and Jameson into focus together by thinking through some of the ways in which lateness might inflect our reading of both writers and how James’s late style itself might be one locus or point of origin for Jameson’s often lugubrious writings on the emergence of modernist and postmodernist subjectivity. Finally, we might reflect on whether Jameson, if he is an *untimely* writer, as Benjamin Kunkel notes in the epigraph with which I began, is also a writer concerned, like Adorno, with lateness.

Jameson was among the first critics of James to trace out a deep connection between the formal features of James’s late style—in particular its valorization of point of view—and what he conceived of as the construction of an aesthetic consciousness

that tried to stand opposed to the alienating energies of modern capitalist and industrial societies. James's modulation and refinement of point of view in the late fiction is, for Jameson in *The Political Unconscious* (1981), evidence of his commitment to helping to create and uphold a "bourgeois subject or monadic ego" (221). Jameson argues that the "Jamesian point of view, which comes into being as a protest and a defense against reification, ends up furnishing a powerful ideological instrument in the perpetuation of an increasingly subjectivized and psychological world" (221–22). Whilst this reading of James's late aesthetics has bred much critical work that reads the later novels as an evasion of the socio-political world, Jameson is perhaps less critical of James's writing than its reception. Jameson is in fact doing more in *The Political Unconscious* to critique the modernist appropriation of James—say, Ezra Pound's reading of James as "wholly exempt" from "political connotations" and as a surrogate for his own hatred of the "abomination" of mass "Kulchur" (313)—than to critique James. It is more that the train of associations that lead away from late James "furnishes" the indulgent ahistoricism of modernist subjectivity. Jameson is not necessarily going as far, as Margery Sabin would have it, as "disparag[ing] James's psychologizing themes and techniques as epitomizing the cult of the personal in bourgeois capitalist ideology" (206). Rather, he is drawing attention, I think, to the disjuncture between objectivity and subjectivity that, for Adorno, characterizes lateness. Reframing Jameson's representation of James as the last emissary of the realist program and of the efforts of the late novels to maintain the coherence of the individual point of view in the face of increasing socio-cultural fragmentation and atomization, we can think of late James as a more universal animal and of his twentieth century works of fiction as being a dramatization of the condition of lateness described by Adorno (in works such as "Late Style in Beethoven"). In Adorno's criticism, lateness is marked more broadly by a "disjunction of subjectivity and objectivity, so that as work becomes late it becomes increasingly inorganic" (8). This disjunction manifests itself in an increasing difficulty and restlessness, which Adorno talks about in *Philosophy of Modern Music*: in Beethoven, Adorno finds evidence for this late style in a music "transformed more and more from something significant into something obscure—even to itself" (19). In James, we might find such evidence in the overblown refinement of his sentences, their intricate internal ebb and flow and the way in which they resist easy translation.

Jameson himself, while drawing attention to the fact that the formal aspects of James's late style are intimately bound up with his bourgeois ideology, couches his representation of James in Adorno's subjective and objective terms:

[The] Jamesian invention of point of view (or better still, Henry James' codification of this already existing technique, his transformation of it into the most fundamental of narrative categories, and the development around it of a whole aesthetic) is a genuinely historical act. The subject having been by the logic of social development stripped from its textual object, the latter must now be constructed in such a way as to bear the place of the former within itself: the narrative becomes a tree-crashing sound that will remain *heard* even when the forest is empty. . . . What is perhaps less well understood, even today, about the Jamesian aesthetic is the degree to which point of view is also part and parcel of a whole ideology. (*PM* 221)

Here, Jameson has James dramatize the failure in the relationship between subjectivity and objectivity that, for Adorno, is symptomatic of late aesthetics. The capitulation of the objective self in capitalist economy can be halted only momentarily in the moment of aestheticism and decadence by psychologization. James's project is doomed to failure. But there is no other path for James to take. Edward Said describes Adorno's conception of lateness as "includ[ing] the idea that one cannot really go beyond lateness at all, not transcending or lifting oneself out of lateness but rather deepening that lateness" (272). In the final sentence of the quote above, though, is the crux. It is simply that the bourgeois cult of the individual in late James's modulation of point of view is irreducible and untranslatable. In his refusal to create literary worlds based on "the fatal futility of fact" (as he calls it in the preface to *The Spoils of Poynton*, *A London Life* and *The Chaperon* in the New York Edition) James adopts the ideological stance that the objective world is not so much the transparent source for the fictional but an historical reality that must be reduced "almost to nought . . . washed free of awkward accretions and hammered into a sacred hardness" (vii, v). The work of fiction for James is not ahistorical *per se*, but fiction writing for the James of the prefaces involves an erasure of the historical as a process of the assertion of aesthetic consciousness. Or, as Jameson himself puts it in *The Prison House of Language* (1972), the text "speaks only of its own being, of its own construction" (89). The withering of any genuine capacity for individual experience in capitalism, in a world that conditions and administers such experience in preformed modes, is one of the issues that James's late style addresses in oblique ways. In his radical separation, in the late fiction, of the world of history from the world of fictive representation, James's style enacts an ideological opposition to the stultifying effects of capitalist modes of production and consumption. This is precisely why Jameson considers James's privileging of point of view and invention of aesthetic consciousness a "genuinely historical act" (221). It is an untimely intervention aimed at sequestering fiction away from the banalities of the mass market.

The strategies that James employs to achieve this radical separation are hallmarks of the late style. For Kevin Ohi, "James disrupts the possibility of conceiving of novelistic language in mimetic terms; his late style—not only its famous density and obscurity of reference, but also its characteristic disorientations of intelligibility [and] its unevenly ironized and ironizing narrative perspectives—puts into practice this anti-mimetic theory" (128). The anti-mimetic quality of James's late novels and stories gestures toward another point of overlap with Adorno and with Jameson in turn: their irreducibility. For Said, Jameson himself "speaks very well about the sheer intelligence of [Adorno's] sentences, their incomparable refinement, their programmatically complex internal movement, the way they have of almost routinely foiling a first, or second, or third attempt at paraphrasing their content" (272). Shierry Weber Nichol森 describes this quality of Adorno's work as, in essence, *lateness-in-action*. Attempting to grasp the effects of late capitalism on autonomy and subjectivity in modernism, Nichol森 argues that "Adorno's own work is late work as well, and its difficulties are consonant with its enterprise" (8). For Adorno, the performance of lateness is a necessary condition of explaining it. Moreover, as Said suggests, "[i]n the performance of individual critical thinking there is 'the force of protest'" (266).

In the same way, reading James through Adorno's conception of lateness, we arrive at a resistance—a "force of protest" against any historical or political monad.

The loops and knots in point of view in a novel like *The Ambassadors*—the evasiveness and unease of the narrator’s “I” and the different ghostly presences of the author in the text—are evidence of what John Carlos Rowe calls “the literary response to the crisis of the philosophical subject occasioned by the history of capitalism’s alienation of the individual” (119). Through his own modulation of the location of the central consciousness in the novel—he is, for Rowe, “at once the protagonist . . . the dispersed author . . . and the implied reader” (120)—James shows the extent to which he finds in consciousness the locus of all that is authentic and real.

But where does Jameson sit in this matrix? I want to conclude by offering a couple of observations (and they can be no more) about Jameson: like James, he is aware of his own untimeliness and like both James and Adorno he celebrates his own often obscure, difficult critical voice as the site of protest against paraphrase and reduction. Jameson’s own relationship to lateness is multivalent: lateness certainly inflects his language throughout the work of the last few decades with a kind of nostalgia, or nostalgias, as Evan Watkins calls them: “nostalgia for ‘dialectic,’ for ‘Hegel,’ for ‘idealism,’ ‘for totalising,’ for ‘master narratives,’ for ‘History’ (in caps of course), for ‘modernism’” (17). Might the kinds of nostalgia of which Jameson is often accused amount to something related to James’s own lateness—a one-way street that only leads, lugubriously, into deeper, more entrenched displays of cultural critique?

This lugubrious style has been commented on by Geoffrey Galt Harpham. For Harpham, the transitions of Jameson’s work in the last few decades amount to a capitulation of sorts: he has “surrendered the pain that made his work so bracing, the outraged sense of the intolerable injustice of domination that had previously occasioned his lucidity” (232). This “surrender” of the vigorous dialectical voice in Jameson’s later works is figured by Harpham as a kind of sacrifice:

Another way of thinking of Jameson’s decade-long meditation on post-modernism would be as a final, dramatic sacrifice, a willed surrender of his work’s greatness out of a scholarly respect for the character of his subject. Jameson has fashioned a critical style appropriate to postmodernity, and has, in the process, surrendered his “modernist” status as charismatic Master. (232)

Jameson’s master here is Adorno. But Jameson’s Marxist apparatus is more supple than Adorno’s. Within Jameson’s critical apparatus, the totalizing effect of a genuine Marxist reading—the “absolute horizon of all reading and all interpretation” (*PO* 17)—represents an apotheosis of hermeneutics. However, while Jameson remains compellingly convincing on this point, he is never so dogmatic as to preclude or denigrate other kinds of literary criticism. Likewise, Jameson is no activist—his political discourse is directed toward the intellectual and pedagogical rather than toward the genuinely revolutionary. There is a tone, or an attitude, in Jameson’s work (and I’m thinking of the body of work produced in the twenty-first century in particular) that is—dare we say—*passive*. This is no negative criticism: what Jameson has arrived at is a kind of ideological negative capability, especially in his literary criticism. If he can critique Yeats, Pound, and Eliot as “true reactionaries of the blackest stamp” (*PM* 312), Harpham says “this is a single, almost off-handed comment, made without energy, detail, or real conviction. More characteristically, his literary criticism documents the evaporation of political content” (215).

Ultimately, Jameson's own realization that his works of profound and erudite insight serve to undermine their own status as ideological commentary by reinforcing many of the class privileges that currently shape educational access in the United States seems to more sharply display his understanding of his own lateness. As Benjamin Kunkel says,

Jameson recognised the problem: "What is socially offensive about 'theoretical' texts like my own," he said in an interview, is "not their inherent difficulty, but rather the signals of higher education, that is, of class privilege, which they emit." But of course he couldn't solve it. (14)

Jameson's reaction to the problem of his own untimeliness is far more politically assured and fine-grained than James's, but it amounts to the same thing: both writers *deepen* their mediation of their socio-cultural milieu by the production of more cryptic literary and linguistic responses to it. This is, I think, what Said understands to be the stylistic manifestation of Adorno's concept of lateness. If in James this is self-evident, the reception of Jameson's more recent commentary has often been couched in similar terms. As Evan Watkins says of Jameson's works of the last decade or so, "as a reader one finds oneself . . . pawing more and more frenetically at webbing after sticky webbing of ghostly philosophical debate thrown into the air by his language" (18–19). This "deepening" of response in what we might call late Jameson finds its source, I want to suggest, in precisely Kunkel's "untimeliness." To find oneself ideologically fractured, in a socio-cultural milieu that seems to place you on the wrong side of the dialectic—perhaps that might be a useful rejoinder or addition to Adorno's concept of lateness. If it is, then both James and Jameson are untimely, the nebulous echoes and the "sticky webbing of ghostly philosophical debate" that permeate their works a product of their deepened lateness. Said's description of Adorno's lateness—the lateness that Jameson finds so powerful an interpretative tool in *Late Marxism: Adorno, or, the Persistence of the Dialectic* (1990)—might easily parse James's own late attitude to the world: "Lateness is being at the end, fully conscious, full of memory, and also very (even preternaturally) aware of the present" (Said 269).

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