

## THEORIES AND METHODOLOGIES

# What Was to Be Done? And How? “On Interpretation” in *The Political Unconscious*

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## What Was to Be Done?

What sort of intervention was *The Political Unconscious*, appearing as it did on the cusp of the 1980s? What needed to be done? As the 1970s wound down or up, interest in “theory” in the humanities was hovering around its zenith and people in departments other than literature were paying a lot of attention to what people in literature departments were thinking about: metaphor, rhetoric, narrative, emplotment, and sometimes interpretation pretty darn generally.<sup>1</sup> Various proponents of structuralism and poststructuralism, especially emanating from France, had posited language as the most encompassing category for understanding culture. Martin Heidegger famously conceived of language as “the house of being,” and a good deal of his adherents followed him in thinking of understanding as a fundamental and all-but-omnipresent activity, of which interpretation of texts and everyday language would be charged sorts.<sup>2</sup> The linguistic had its turn and would keep turning for some time. With Hans-Georg Gadamer’s *Wahrheit und Methode* (1960; *Truth and Method*), hermeneutics came to be articulated more resolutely with aesthetics (play, genius), and the whole history of this mode of thinking and criticism—Friedrich Schleiermacher being perhaps its most prominent figure—was thought through retroactively, a project that helped spur the work of Poetik und Hermeneutik, a sprawling group of major intellectuals from various disciplines, among which Hans Robert Jauss, Wolfgang Iser, and Hans Blumenberg became driving forces in the 1970s and beyond. The work of Jauss and Iser was becoming available in the English-speaking world, foregrounding matters of

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PMLA 137.3 (2022), doi:10.1632/S0030812922000463

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interpretation in literary-historical and phenomenological, reader-oriented modes.<sup>3</sup> Peter Szondi, one of the great comparatists of his generation and one of the most theoretically inclined, had been lecturing on hermeneutics to cohorts of students in Berlin, and after his death the lectures reached a wider audience.<sup>4</sup> So in the late 1970s the hoary-sounding term *hermeneutics* was back in circulation. Its older discursive home had been primarily in the realm of biblical understanding, though often generalized to textual or linguistic interpretation as such, as in the hands of Schleiermacher, a theologian but also a philosopher who lectured on secular topics in (almost resolutely) secular fashion: dialectics, aesthetics, and more.

I recall wondering, in the late 1970s, why someone like Fredric Jameson would take the time to translate Wilhelm Dilthey’s historico-programmatic essay “The Rise of Hermeneutics.” But that was one of several methodological traditions Jameson worked through in depth, for their value in themselves and for what they might contribute to a Marxist hermeneutic. Some figures in the hermeneutic tradition thought deeply, sometimes in dialectical fashion, as did Schleiermacher most robustly, about the poles of subject and object that organize much of *The Political Unconscious*. Jameson notes at the outset how dialectical criticism tends to prioritize one of those two poles and that he has chosen here the path of the subject, granting a primacy to how things are understood—in terms of codes, signs, genres, and the like—without reducing the subject to an affair of psychology. Yet the very attention to the subject will turn out, dialectically, to entail how any subject is steeped in the objective.

In France, a similar primacy of language had taken hold, with the belated and broad reception of Ferdinand de Saussure whose work in structural linguistics became newly foundational for the human sciences: anthropology, psychoanalysis, sociology, and beyond. As Jameson observed in *The Prison-House of Language*: “Language as a model! To rethink everything through once again in terms of linguistics! What is surprising, it would seem, is only that no one had ever thought

of doing so before, for of all the elements of consciousness and of social life, language would appear to enjoy some incomparable ontological priority . . .” (vii). But this new adoption of language as a model for analyzing all kinds of nonlinguistic or not exactly linguistic matters—diametrically opposed to the trends in Germany—came with various attacks on hermeneutics and its putatively too metaphysical or idealist presuppositions. A little paradoxically, (the German) Friedrich Nietzsche served as one of the guiding lights for a lot of work by Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida—and before them Georges Bataille, Pierre Klossowski, and others.<sup>5</sup> Nietzsche had himself started as a classical philologist, praising the “slow reading” of his discipline even as he decried its institutional blinders and postures. He would later come to posit interpretation as altogether ubiquitous (*Dawn* 6). But the very claim that there were “nur Interpretationen” (“only interpretations”) had the effect of destabilizing hermeneutics rather than establishing some expanded field of old-school interpretation as fundamental (*Nachgelassene Fragmente* 315). A whole new wave of French theorists was seen as problematizing interpretation rather than affirming it. What Paul Ricoeur, in his book on Sigmund Freud, dubbed the hermeneutics of suspicion (30) often went hand in hand with a suspicion of hermeneutics. From within the long history of Marxist thought, some of it explicitly occupied with interpretation (as in the Frankfurt School), Louis Althusser was, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, looming large, challenging entrenched notions of interpretation, as well as attacking the notion of expressive causality and even what he called historicism. All of this, not to overlook some programs of the American New Criticism (intentional fallacy, genetic fallacy) and recurring issues in Marxist criticism worldwide, combined to suggest to Jameson the imperative of some sustained reflection on interpretation.

Jameson countered all this by proposing politics as “the absolute horizon of all reading and interpretation” (*Political Unconscious* 17).<sup>6</sup> The political stands as the highest, fullest level in the fourfold scheme of interpretation, recast—with a shock of

the old—from medieval hermeneutics, a model reaffirmed in Jameson's *Allegory and Ideology* of 2019. The patristic model of four levels for the interpretation of scripture (literal, allegorical, moral, anagogical), rewritten for literature in the 1950s by Northrop Frye, is repurposed by Jameson primarily by conceiving of the anagogical as “political reading,” entailing nothing less than the “collective ‘meaning’ of history” (*Political Unconscious* 31).<sup>7</sup> It was partly in response to poststructuralism's various challenges to interpretation traditionally understood and to the often concomitant critiques of totalizing schemes that Jameson restated, in a finer tone, claims for interpretation and totality—and at the same time.

In *The Political Unconscious* the claims made for a certain totality are rather extravagant: the mystery of the cultural past “can be re-enacted *only* if the human adventure is one”; moreover, “matters of the past can recover their urgency for us *only* if they are retold within the unity of a single great collective story. . . .” (19; my emphases).<sup>8</sup> For Jameson, that one grand plot is encapsulated in Marx's ringing dictum: “The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles. . . .” (qtd. on 20).<sup>9</sup> In his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, Hegel too had taken a stab at epitomizing this one story in one sentence: “The history of the world is nothing other than the progress of the consciousness of freedom. . . .,” a notion not so incompatible with Marx's.<sup>10</sup> Marx's full sentence comprises class struggles of various kinds, with varying resolutions, whereas Hegel's is more unitary and abstract. Both offer the sketchy template of a single story. Does one have to choose, absolutely, between such totalizable histories and a recognition of difference all the way down? Or almost? Not necessarily, to judge by the work of Ato Sekyi-Otu on “left universalism,” a distinguished recent intervention on this terrain.<sup>11</sup> Certainly, the Hegelian and Marxist traditions do loads to account for all kinds of difference, contradiction, error, and contingency within their overarching but still unitary plots. Even Walter Benjamin, when resisting totalizing historical narratives and understanding history as a matter of relations between one moment and another, nonetheless imagined the angel of history—a kind

of enlightened historical materialist—seeing history as “one single catastrophe” (“On the Concept of History” 392; my emphasis). Perhaps one can conceive of a totality that would include all differences and likenesses, and do so in a way that does not entail the nefarious things totality came to be associated with: suppression and marginalization of the particular or singular, to say nothing of the specter of the totalitarian.<sup>12</sup> This posited totality of real and imagined relations—and the latter have their real, material valence—is hardly available for cognition all at once or, really, ever: no person, no epic, no people can tell this one story. But it has a force as what Jean-Paul Sartre calls a “phantom totality” (170). And it can function as a kind of regulative idea, in a Kantian sense, orienting and guiding thought without exactly securing it.<sup>13</sup> Hence the pertinence of summoning up and recasting no less than the medieval system of four levels of meaning first elaborated for the all-encompassing story of the Christian Bible.

Marxist criticism has traditionally tasked itself with articulating relations between economic base and ideological superstructure, a binary opposition with considerable staying power, however difficult it can prove to move between them. A prime medium and site of mediation, on which Jameson dilates in the practical criticism to come in the book, is genre.<sup>14</sup> Marxist criticism has tended to excel on the matter of genre (Georg Lukács on the historical novel, Benjamin on the story, Theodor Adorno on the essay, Raymond Williams on tragedy, etc.). Resisting the reflex appeal to the “reflection” of Lukács and the too simple homologues of Lucien Goldmann's (otherwise brilliant) *The Hidden God*, Jameson takes things to another level, as it were, by charting the multiple determinations (and thus overdeterminations) of instances of genre, most spectacularly in romance, rife with desire and fantasies of wish fulfillment, operating in a libidinal economy not divorceable from economy proper.<sup>15</sup> Such mediations became all the more necessary in a postmedieval modernity when relations of “public and private, psychological and social, the poetic and the political” have become all the more “incommensurable” (31). It is only by

means of an analysis of one's object in its mediated relations that one could come up with or plausibly gesture toward the present-and-absent totality in which any work lives and moves and has its being.

### And How!

It was not self-evident that a Marxist study of narrative as a socially symbolic act required an extended meditation on interpretation as a prolegomenon to the work to come. What is the right term for Jameson's sprawling but pointed set of reflections on interpretation that forms the first chapter of the book? It is surely not only an "introduction" to the chapters on romance, Balzac, George Gissing, and Joseph Conrad in its wake, though it is partly that.<sup>16</sup> Disquisition seems too fussy a word. Treatise? That was one of Benjamin's foregrounded genres, whose possibilities are registered elsewhere by Jameson. Manifesto? None of these seems quite right for the remarkable writing on interpretation that takes up fully a third of the book, writing indebted to the agile dialectical tradition but also even to novelistic prose.<sup>17</sup>

I note that one sentence in the grand, programmatic first chapter runs for eighteen lines, over 180 words, and turns out, in the end, to be a question. There are some twenty commas before the question mark. Here is the sentence that precedes the huge one, followed immediately by the immense one proper:

Lévi-Strauss's work also suggests a more general defense of the proposition of a political unconscious than we have hitherto been able to present, insofar as it offers the spectacle of so-called primitive peoples perplexed enough by the dynamics and contradictions of their relatively simple forms of tribal organization to project decorative or mythic resolutions of issues that they are unable to articulate conceptually. But, if this is the case for pre-capitalist and even pre-political societies, then how much more must it be true for the citizen of the modern *Gesellschaft*, faced with the great constitutional options of the revolutionary period, and with the corrosive and tradition-annihilating effects of the spread of a money and market economy, with the changing cast of collective characters which oppose the

bourgeoisie, now to an embattled aristocracy, now to an urban proletariat, with the great fantasms of the various nationalisms, now themselves virtual "subjects of history" of a rather different kind, with the social homogenization and psychic constriction of the rise of the industrial city and its "masses," the sudden appearance of the great transnational forces of communism and fascism, followed by the advent of the superstates and the onset of that great ideological rivalry between capitalism and communism, which, no less passionate and obsessive than that which, at the dawn of modern times, seethed through the wars of religion, marks the final tension of our now global village? (79–80)

The tour-de-force that is this sentence gestures at many key formations of world history, its economic and political conjunctures, ranging from the tribal and the "so-called primitive"—that is, not primitive—to the overarching, dueling systems of economic-political governing in the twentieth century, back to the seventeenth century, and forward again to what was then the present: "our now global village."<sup>18</sup> The immense sentence is itself about as global in scope as can be. That Jameson can invoke so much in the usually short form of the sentence is a pronounced example of the need to think and write otherwise, and especially to engage the idea and actuality of totality, while performing an epitome of it.<sup>19</sup> The commitment to dialectical thinking informs his writing not just conceptually and in terms of the disposition and treatment of materials in a capacious historical-materialist fashion—no method is alien to him and each has its "sectoral validity" (10)—but also at a granular level, especially the sentence form.<sup>20</sup>

A refreshing feature of *The Political Unconscious*, judged against most academic writing, is how varied the length of the chapters is. Who else writes like this? What one gets is what needs to have been said. This pertains, Jameson's formulations alert us, to where and when in an argument something is enunciated: "Now what must be said" (40); "what must now be stressed" (99); "still we need to say a little more about . . ." (81). In the grand scheme of things, the overarching historical imperative, Jameson contends, is for "collective struggle to wrest a realm of Freedom from a realm of

Necessity” (19)—capital letters suggesting the weight of the issue—and Jameson performs some small version of this in the writing of his own text. Socialism in one sentence and socialism in one book, as it were. The insistence on the historicity and necessity of his own writing—making Jameson a kind of nonvanishing mediator—is a minor moment in the larger argument about the “ground and untranscendable horizon” of history (102). In the years surrounding the publication of *The Political Unconscious* there were a lot of inept (non)readings of Derrida’s famous dictum “il n’y a pas de hors-texte,” misleadingly translated as “there is nothing outside the text,” sometimes understood as if Derrida were making a psychotic claim. Without affirming Derrida’s precise claim, Jameson nonetheless proposes “that history is *not* a text, not a narrative, master or otherwise, but that, as an absent cause, it is inaccessible to us except in textual form, and that our approach to it and to the Real itself necessarily passes through its prior textualization, its narrativization in the political unconscious” (35).<sup>21</sup> This history is, famously, “what hurts, . . . what refuses desire and sets inexorable limits to individual and collective praxis. . . .” (102). Lauren Berlant supplements this dictum in a Jamesonian spirit in saying, “History hurts, but not only. It also engenders optimism in response to the oppressive presence of what dominates or is taken for granted” (121). This is not unrelated to the utopian kernels Jameson finds in even unlikely objects apparently steeped in noxious ideology. This history and these histories have to be read in something like the powerful political framework elaborated by Jameson, perhaps responding to Benjamin’s beguiling proposal, in the drafts to his “On the Concept of History,” that “the historical method is a philological one” (“Paralipomena” 405) with a political philology writ large.<sup>22</sup>

traveler of Jameson’s whose disciplinary formation was not in literature but who drew a lot from literary theory and criticism (Northrop Frye, prominently) to make an intervention in intellectual history in its expanded field.

2. The most pointed analysis is found in *Sein und Zeit (Being and Time)*, pars. 31–33.

3. Blumenberg’s major works would not be available in English until the 1980s and were on the huge side and so perhaps forbidding for that reason. In recent years shorter works by Blumenberg have been appearing in a fairly steady stream, and the recently published *Hans Blumenberg Reader* (2020) should effect something of a quantum leap in his reception.

4. His *Einführung in die literarische Hermeneutik (An Introduction to Literary Hermeneutics)* was published in 1975. Its partial English translation appeared only in 1995. Related material appeared in English in a volume of his essays, *On Textual Understanding*.

5. The concentration here on French and German theory only partly corresponds to the texture of Jameson’s work. He engages with theory and culture in a more global fashion than most critics and scholars: Russian, Chinese, Japanese, South American, etc. And his work is more global still when it comes to film and literature, as in *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*, before “global” was much of an organizing principle for academic work or a hiring principle in academia.

6. The invocation of the word “horizon” signals Jameson’s positioning of his own stance in relation to the tradition of phenomenological hermeneutics, from Edmund Husserl’s *Horizont* to Gadamer’s *Horizontverschmelzung* (“fusion of horizons”) to the *Erwartungshorizont* (“horizon of expectations”) of Jaus.

7. In *The Hegel Variations*, Jameson proposes, strikingly, that Hegel’s *Geist*, usually translated as “spirit,” best be understood and translated as “the collective.” See the chapter titled “Spirit as Collectivity: *Antigone* as the One into Two” (75–95).

8. In a searching analysis, Robbins focuses, refreshingly, on the word “great,” whereas I and almost everyone else fixate on the “one.”

9. Marx’s sentence continues: “freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman—in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large or in the common ruin of the contending classes” (qtd. in Jameson, *Political Unconscious* 20). It’s a capacious, dialectical sentence that is a model for Jameson’s own sentence-making.

10. The German of Hegel’s pronouncement (as recorded by students) reads, “Die Weltgeschichte ist der Fortschritt im Bewusstsein der Freiheit . . .” (32).

11. See also the collective discussion and debate by Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek (Butler et al.).

12. But Jameson will contend that Hegel’s works are not quite as totalizing and systematic as all that, or as they are made out to be. Certainly, they do not imply airtight closure, as some

## NOTES

1. Hayden White’s influential *Metahistory* (1973), much read in the years before *The Political Unconscious*, came from a fellow



anti-Hegelians contend. On the nonclosure of Hegelian texts and thinking, see Comay and Ruda.

13. The need to take account of totality is a feature of virtually every extended study of Jameson's, including the single-author studies of Bertolt Brecht, Theodor Adorno, Sartre, and Hegel, where one might be seduced by the relative autonomy of an individual corpus. Totality is a more constant preoccupation of the collection *Valences of the Dialectic*, and there most especially in the essay on Lukács, "History and Class Consciousness as an Unfinished Project." In *Brecht and Method*, Jameson advocates that the individual-sounding notion of style be supplemented by attention to the necessarily more collective mode of rhetoric (20).

14. See especially Jameson's remarks on and around *Political Unconscious* 25.

15. But almost as if to counter this obvious trait in romance, Jameson's analysis of Balzac goes under the rubric "Realism and Desire."

16. I note that the book's subtitle is "Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act" but that of the inaugural section "On Interpretation" is "Literature as a Socially Symbolic Act," possibly indicating a more capacious scope, at least within the literary field. But Jameson is also sometimes concerned with nonliterary narrative, as in anthropology, psychoanalysis, and philosophy, to say nothing of historiography.

17. Though somewhat singular in Jameson's corpus, the opening section on interpretation in *The Political Unconscious* shares something of the texture of the final section titled "Metacommentary" in Jameson's *Marxism and Form*, both programmatic and reflective on methodology.

18. The McLuhanism of that phrase might sound quaint now, but in the late 1970s it had not lost its shelf life as a figure for the newly felt proximities of a world being reconfigured.

19. For excellent reflections on the status of the sentence, including in writing important to Jameson—like Adorno's—see Mieszkowski. There is another immense sentence in the book, of some 140 words, on the final page, in the peroration about History.

20. And elsewhere even in the footnote! In a remarkable note in *Marxism and Form*, Jameson describes the form and function of this marginal textual feature, ending the note that occupies a full third of a page this way: "at the bottom of the page" (9), a phrase that itself appears at the bottom of the page.

21. Cf. Jameson's citation, in his book on Adorno, of this passage from *Minima Moralia*: "History does not merely touch on language, but takes place in it" (*Late Marxism* 42n26).

22. Were there to be a reboot of the first chapter, I'd like to know how Jameson would situate his thoughts on interpretation in relation to the history of philology, not least of the more adventurous sort, ranging, say, from Vico to Schlegel to Schleiermacher to Nietzsche to Timpanaro to Jameson's much-admired Auerbach and maybe to the more recent work of Werner Hamacher and Barbara Cassin. (I have only the sketchiest sense of how non-Western philology operates, but I assume Jameson's is more robust.) Some advanced thinking in philosophically informed philology is already

Marxist or roughly compatible with it. Edmund Wilson's *To the Finland Station* begins with Marx's encounter with Vico, whose allegorical hermeneutic for history included attention to something like class struggle. Closer to Jameson's home, there's Adorno, whose great essay "Parataxis" reflects on philological practice; or, more emphatically, there's Benjamin. The words "philology" or "philological" occur some dozen times in Jameson's recent book on Benjamin, *The Benjamin Files*.

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