

## Chapter One

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# FREDRIC JAMESON

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## The Success and Failure of Critique

The American cultural system affords its intellectuals no eminence of prestige and controversy comparable to that of Derrida in France, or Habermas in Germany; but if it did, one of the few Americans who could plausibly be put in their league is Fredric Jameson. He wrote his first book, *Sartre* (1961), at 26; as a devotee of Sartre's existential phenomenology, just then incorporating Sartre's new allegiance to Marxism, Jameson was perhaps better positioned than almost anyone in America to respond knowledgeably and critically to the arrival here of that intellectual ferment usually subsumed under the rubric of "theory." The challenges posed in turn by structuralism, deconstruction, poststructuralism, postmodernism, and so on, quickly generated ardent pledges of allegiance from smitten disciples, indignant jeremiads from affronted traditionalists, and innumerable handbook guides for the perplexed. Among aspirants to theory, most cleaved to one vocabulary, method, or "master," forsaking all others; even the giants noticed their rivals chiefly to step on them. (Derrida's deconstructions of his contemporaries usually leave them looking naive and futile; Habermas's potshots at theory in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* proved an embarrassment even to many of his disciples.) Only Jameson accepted the challenge of attempting to do justice

to the full range of theory. In a prolific stream of essays and books, he took on all the theory discourses, testing them in their own and in each other's terms, synthesizing, "transcoding," putting each to the proof of the others, and putting each to work with the others, in ways that made him, by his mid-forties, recognized by fans and detractors alike as among the most ambitious and widely-ranging culture-critics of his academic generation.

So: an eminently successful project, and career—and hence, in part, my title. But I had better begin by explaining that this study does *not* offer an inventory of Jameson's work with a judgment of success or failure attached to each item (though it will be apparent that I think some of Jameson's efforts more compelling than others). A book as brief as this can sketch only the broad outlines of Jameson's accomplishment, and I foreground the success/failure problem because it seems to me to generalize a problematic whose projection, over the course of so diverse and prolific an oeuvre, into so many local particularizations, has too often obscured the larger coherences. To call the success/failure problem itself a "dialectic" suggests how comprehensively it extends into every paradigm (most dramatically, that of "the sublime," in senses to be indicated shortly) by means of which Jameson labors to grapple with the larger dialectic itself—to grapple with it, which must also be, he insists, to enact it in the writing of "dialectical sentences." Hence the interest for this study, the heuristic *point d'appui*, of Jameson's writing *as writing*: the success/failure problem agitates virtually every sentence Jameson writes; whatever else a given text of his might be about, it is always also about *this*. It is his constant subtext, preoccupation, even "self-consciousness," for it is the question of critical ambition itself: what can critique (that is, effort like Jameson's own) do or be in our period? What successes can it aspire to? To what failures is it peculiarly liable? How does critique's *written-ness*, its status as "a kind of writing," figure into these questions? How, if at all, can merely "textual effects" render or participate in the dialectic of historical processes critique aims to illuminate? Most pointedly, for a Marxist critic, how can a "revolutionary" critique be said to succeed in a period when revolution itself is failing?

Such anxieties express preoccupations peculiar to our moment, from the stratospherically speculative (the implication of "critique" itself in logo-, onto-, theo-, phallo- [etc.] -centric subject/object metaphysics) to the grittily earthbound (the devolution of the U.S.S.R.). But the question of the success or failure of Marxism has invited, or challenged, the largest criteria of measure ever since Marx: the intellectual ambition of Marx himself, the global scope of his interests, from the beginning inscribed within the tradition that bears his name a grandeur (or grandiosity) of program that aspires to encompass every domain of knowledge, to realize itself as the "untranscendable horizon" of all scientific, cultural, social, his-

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torical, and political inquiry. Nor is “inquiry” all, for Marxism takes on other burdens, other difficulties, besides those of the study: the aspiration to shape political action, and thus to assist the coming-into-being of the historical process itself. And Marxism shoulders moral burdens also, of concern, even anguish about the plight of the oppressed, as well as burdens that are “moral” in another sense, the sense that connects less with “morality” than with “morale”; for it is almost impossible to name or even imagine a Marxist text devoid of any hortatory subtext, without any rhetorical or libidinal investment in the task of moving its readers or hearers. (Here, too, Marx is the great original: he asks to be read as a scientist, not a moralist, but we would not readily credit any Marxism that shows itself to be deaf to the moralist and ironist audible in Marx’s potent rhetoric.)

As if these programmatic difficulties were not already exorbitant, other ironies and contradictions have made the terms in which Marxist critique can be said to succeed or fail problematic since Marx. The eleventh thesis on Feuerbach, for example, specifies that revolutionary effort cannot content itself with *understanding* the world, but must aspire to nothing less than *changing* it; while another of Marx’s familiar quotations advises that consciousness does not determine, but is determined by, material conditions. For critique, the first of these pronouncements imposes an imperative that the second renders futile—a contradiction that has been fertile for critical and Marxist discourses generally, and, in ways I hope to illuminate in this study, for Jameson in particular.

The point is that the labor of a Marxist intellectual cannot be easy. It involves extraordinary, even prohibitive, difficulty of many different kinds: difficult texts, difficult issues, difficult problems, a (very) difficult history, difficult political conditions, difficult rhetorical burdens—a dauntingly overdetermined multiplicity of ways, in short, in which Marxist critique might succeed or fail. I evoke these difficulties here as a first index of this study’s chief focus, the motivations animating the notorious difficulty of Jameson’s writing. Every commentator on Jameson acknowledges this salient quality of his prose, though only Terry Eagleton, so far as I know, has considered it at any length, and that in a fashion interesting (and interested) enough that I have written about it elsewhere.<sup>1</sup> It is my premise here that Jameson’s importance as a culture-critic is less in his (supposed) conclusions or arguments than in the subtle and complicated mediations of his writing itself. Jameson’s prose is masterful in its encyclopedic command of dauntingly complex materials, yet its effect is less of mastery than of being mastered, as if the predicaments of our historical moment are transmitting their force to every sentence he writes—and this, in my view, is Jameson’s peculiar “success,” what makes his writing potent and compelling even for many who do not share his Marxist commitment.

That the *writing* must be the condition of this success, Jameson himself prescribes. He projects critique as an “impossible task,” and insists that it be written in “dialectical sentences” that not merely analyze or expound, but enact, perform—indeed, *suffer*—the contradictions of their subject matter, the predicaments of society and culture in general, and the “inevitable failure” of the socialist tradition in particular. Such a “dialectical” project labors under a kind of failure imperative: it can succeed only by failing, and by failing only in especially and appropriately demanding and difficult ways.<sup>2</sup> It must evoke the difficulties it aspires to solve, but to the extent that any solution it proposes seems to succeed, the statement of the problem will seem to have failed, by underestimating the problem. And in the context of the historical intransigences of “late capitalism,” no critical gesture could be more unseemly than seeming to succeed: a critique too readily satisfied with merely critical success might seem (“false consciousness”) deluded by its own false consolations for the revolutionary movement’s realworld failures—“an imaginary solution to a real contradiction.”

So much, and it is very much indeed, does Jameson stake on the writing of “dialectical sentences”—a *sine qua non*, he insists, throughout his career and in more than one vocabulary, of the kind, or tradition, of critical work within which he projects his own ambitions, and against which he tests or takes the measure of critical ambition in general. I will have more to say in the following chapter about Jameson’s imperative to “dialectical writing” and his models for it, preeminently Barthes and Adorno; for now, suffice it to say that by the “dialectical” Jameson intends, first of all, a resistance to a certain familiarization or overfamiliarization, a “freezing over” or “thematization” (*P* 91; *LM* 182) of the hardwon insights of critique into clichés or platitudes—in Lukácsian terms, a “reification” of critical labor. For Jameson,

if Marxism as a mental operation is to be characterized as a kind of permanent “inner revolution,” then it is clear that every systematic presentation of it falsifies it in the moment in which it freezes over into a system (*M&F* 362).

Jameson’s “dialectical prose” aspires to preserve Marxism from such falsifying systematization, sustaining or enacting in its word-by-word “working through” that “inner revolution” of which he here speaks. Jameson indicates the success or failure at stake in such a program when he goes on to explain that only such vigilance can resist “the transformation into one more ideology of that [that is, Marxism] which was in its very structure a refusal of all ideology as such” (*M&F* 362).<sup>3</sup>

The foregoing should already have begun to demonstrate how the largest intellectual/moral dimensions of the “failure imperative” pulse through the minutest

capillaries of Jameson's written corpus, the thrusts and qualifications, assertions and "refusals," of those long, relentless, tortuously complicated "dialectical sentences" of his. It is his announced program, continuously put to the proof of his writing practice, to sustain a continuum, a constant intermediation, between macrolevel-context (nothing less than "totality") and microlevel-text. In the agitated medium of his prose, the motif of "failure" exfoliates with Protean prolixity, in manifold guises and variations, always encoding in one form or another the promises and the perils of critical ambition itself.

Hence my premise that the richest access to Jameson is by way of his prose. To begin with, Jameson himself so foregrounds the question of how "dialectical" writing should be written as to make it puzzling that his commentators give it so little attention.<sup>4</sup> Some of them assume (not incorrectly) that readers will benefit from being helped *past* Jameson's prose to a speedier grasp of what it is saying; William Dowling's primer on *The Political Unconscious* served this needful purpose for many back in the early days of trying to cope with Jameson. More ironically, especially the Marxists among Jameson's commentators seem to miss the degree to which Jameson's investment in the way his writing is written (to recall Gertrude Stein) works against what they take to be the conventions of his (and their) genre. Marxist critique since Marx mixes the motives of polemic and analysis to produce a carapace of fighting words, the harder-line the better: the implicit imperative is that whatever "line" is taken should be made as "hard" as possible.<sup>5</sup> Jameson's work is not devoid of these impulses; they are, in the terms of his own discussion of genre in chapter 2 of *The Political Unconscious*, part of critique's unavoidable historical and ideological "sediment." But his larger aim is less to fortify analytical positions in which like-minded Marxists might shelter, than to survey all the arguments and methods available, rotating them critically, testing, probing, pressing each (typically) to its point of failure, in order to assess what sorts of use it may serve, or what ideological sequelae it might entail, for "dialectical" effort like his own. In short, the kinds of success Jameson pursues, as well as the kinds of failure he risks, are very different from those usually taken to be characteristic of critique generically.

Which suggests that among Jameson's ambitions is to help in the remaking of "critique"—a period preoccupation, of course. "Critique" is a word much problematized lately, and I will have more to say in chapter 3 on Jameson's own reservations about it in both its Kantian and its Marxist senses. But perhaps now is the moment to acknowledge a dissonance in my preference, at least initially, for "critique" as an umbrella term for Jameson's work over such alternatives as "theory." Here as with other terminologies in this study, the dissonance is calculated to allow the older vocabulary to foreground problems supposedly "overcome" in the

new. “Critique” gave way to “theory,” for example, because “critique” bore ideological inscriptions, allegedly unsuspected by earlier generations, that “theory” had at last unmasked. But does that mean “theory” has succeeded where “critique” had failed? Has “theory” *solved* the problems incumbent upon “critique,” or simply refused them? If the former, can such a success afford to think itself so simply liberated from longstanding problems? And if the latter, is that declaring victory or acknowledging defeat?

Such questions hover whenever Jameson “transcodes” between one interpretive or analytic vocabulary and another, testing one against the other, finding in each the other’s limit, making of each the other’s critique. And here another inflection of “failure” appears, for what is a method’s “limit” except the (critical) point at which it fails? (“Transcoding” is a fair synecdoche for Jameson’s project at large; his work has served many as a sort of Rosetta stone of theory; and broadly speaking, the power of his work springs from the tension between his formative affinities with the phenomenological tradition and the newer vocabularies and thematics of structuralism and poststructuralism against which he tests and prolongs them.) Yet Jameson himself does not foreground the “critique/theory” binary. Whereas Derrida, for example, is at pains to insist that deconstruction is *not* critique, not even (therefore) critique of critique (for example, *Points* 357), Jameson more ambiguously allows that his project aspires to something other than critique, without ceasing to be critique. (Hence his endorsement of Adorno’s formula of “immanent critique”: critique from within, “homeopathic” critique that renounces the claim, the hubris, of a critical “subject” to have gotten outside of, or meta- to, what we can then no longer call its “object.”) Which helps sustain a sort of optical illusion about Jameson’s work, and the genre cues it emits: his manifest ambition looks like making bold to offer a solution to every possible problem; but the actual effect of his effort is rather to problematize, as richly—as problematically—as possible, every possible solution.<sup>6</sup>

Hence perhaps the simplest kind of “failure” Jameson risks: that of disappointing reader expectations. Fire-breathers keen on polemical slam-bang will find respectful considerations of class enemies from T. S. Eliot to Northrop Frye; connoisseurs of careful analysis will find analysis itself interminably (or terminally?) problematized; the frankly puzzled will find their puzzlement compounded; the programmatizers, wanting defensible positions, will find “positions” shunned as “thematizations.”

And for any of these, no less than for the novice seeking only a first-hand look at the work of an acclaimed culture-critic, the expectation of mere expository clarity can seem almost willfully outraged. Even the adept must find Jameson’s prose more than intermittently exasperating—but to adapt Woody Allen, if it’s not

exasperating, you're not doing it right. To engage with Jameson you must accept that the exasperation is of the essence of the experience—even one of the peculiar enjoyments, or rewards—of reading him. I am not asking the skeptic to admire Jameson's expository failures just because Jameson tells us they are calculated; the skeptic may judge that they are miscalculated, or that the ambition itself is misconceived. But I hope the point clarifies Jameson's way of seeming bold and risk-taking at some moments, diffident and evasive at others; and in any case, our judgments for and against his effort can only benefit from a clearer sense of what he is and is not trying to do.

I have been elaborating a multifold rationale for approaching Jameson by way of his prose style rather than his "arguments" or "positions." Readers of a certain type may already be sharpening knives for a deconstruction of what they will think an emergent binary of "style/content" or (in more up-to-date parlance) "textual/thetic"—an opposition that often extends itself, by an almost irresistible dynamic, as far as "aesthetics/politics." But while it is Jameson's writing I foreground here, a glance at this book's table of contents should disclose that my organizational strategies are broadly thematic. I do not discount the points Jameson argues; rather my aim is to approach them *by way of* his writing, as *produced* by his writing practice and qualified by it, the better to clarify not so much what his positions are, as the provenance—the meaning, effect, motivation—of their unclarity, of their difficulty, of the evident marks of struggle they bear upon themselves. What needs attention, in my view, is less *what* Jameson is saying, than what the way he writes is *doing* to what he is saying.

Which of course requires minute attention to what he is saying as well. I neither bracket "content," nor claim that Jameson does. Indeed, it is Jameson's constant premise that any such binary as "writing/argument," "style/content," or "aesthetics/politics," however instrumentally necessary at some moments of the critical process, will reify, diminishing our participation in the continuing dialectical process itself if our fix(ation) on or in it prevents our yielding to its passage further to the moment in which its differences are *aufgehoben* in a more "totalizing" apprehension. Take "aesthetics/politics," for example: the mystifications of an "aesthetic ideology" that declares art "autonomous" from politics and history are by now a commonplace not only of Marxist but of Left- or Left-liberal discussion generally; but Jameson's practice equally admonishes the Left-zealot whose righteous contempt of "the aesthetic" only inverts the fetishism of her bourgeois opposite number—as if art really *were* apolitical. Just as the sheerest lyric is implicated in the political by reason of its social context, so any work of critical writing is condemned to the condition of the aesthetic by reason of its written-ness. For Jameson, among the aims of "dialectical criticism" is to elicit all the manifold ways

aesthetic production (or cultural production at large, including critique itself) can be, cannot help but be, must be, but also can only imperfectly be, “political” by reason of its determination in and by historical processes—whether it owns or repudiates those determinations, and out of whatever ideological allegiances. Thus Jameson’s version of the phenomenological effort, from Hegel to Heidegger and Sartre, to, as it were, re-noumenize phenomena, or re-ontologize the aesthetic (with the caveat that Jameson projects that effort not as a doctrinal premise, an imperious correction of Kantian error, but as, again, an “impossible task,” a Sisyphean labor, conflictedly fraught with desire and anxiety, whose stakes—and whose potential for sublimity—are encoded in the utopian hope that Sisyphean struggle might now and then yield, however momentarily, some Promethean result).

But, to back up slightly, all this means that Jameson’s “dialectical” way with a binary involves two moves that can seem incompatible: 1) the opposing terms are, as we saw a few pages ago, invoked against each other, each marking the other’s limit or point of failure; or, contrarily, 2) the opposition itself is reframed, “totalized” (or deconstructed!), that is, its opposed terms shown to be not really separable—the opposition itself, the very *oppositonality* of its opposed terms, is shown to fail. What determines the choice between these moves at a given moment, on a given page, is the role, the actantial function (so to speak), that the binary is just then playing in the drama of Jameson’s patiently turbulent sentences. Is the binary structuring the critical method or program, or does it structure the issue or crux the program is trying to “solve”? Is it, in short, part of the problem, or part of the solution? In such situations, the “failure imperative” usually dictates that the outcome obey or confirm the premise (or “motivation”) of “impossible task” and “inevitable failure”: the aspirations of critique will be checked by the intractability of the problems it engages. (As is true in many other productions of “theory,” of course—but I am trying to suggest why Jameson’s deconstructions of binary cruxes *feel* so different from, say, Derrida’s, though not so different from, say, de Man’s.)

Hence the power and ubiquity of “ideological closure” as Jameson’s figure for everything “dialectical criticism” is up against. Like its Kantian avatar, the problem of solipsism, “ideological closure” is one of those intellectual constructions that is self-reinforcing: the premises that make it thinkable in the first place seem to make it an unbanishable specter haunting thought ever after. But, to recall the title of the last chapter of *The Political Unconscious*, Jameson’s work maintains the hope that there is a “dialectic of ideology and utopia.” If ideology sustains itself on antinomic logics of “closure,” utopia seeks alternative strategies that afford or promise, or at least license hope of a break, breach, or opening in structures, closures, prison-houses that had seemed escape-proof. Utopia must aspire—it can



only aspire (it can do nothing else; it can do nothing more than)—to sublimate ideology's antinomies.

This vocabulary ("sublating antinomies") is meant to recall Kant and Hegel—for my sense of how Jameson's writing works turns on issues for which these two make a suggestive binary. Where Kant makes "antinomy" a kind of *nomos* in itself, Hegel's "contradiction" makes an opportunity of a principled antinomianism. (Think of Hegel's "identity of identity and non-identity" or "identity of subject and object" as *sabots* tossed into the looms of Kantian antinomy, and Hegel may begin to seem a figure proleptic of Derridean "play," without the Derridean coyness.) I hope it goes without saying that "Kant" and "Hegel" here stand not for systems or doctrines, but rather for tones, moods, affects: libidinal resources (or predicaments) as these are mobilized and make themselves felt in the "textual effects" of Jameson's writing—including "the sublime," whose connotations of the antithetical, of catastrophic reversal, of antinomies "sublated," *aufgehoben*, Jameson's writing of the 1980s will mobilize as Hegelian resources in the "dialectical" struggle against the ideological reifications wrought by Kantian analytic.

But Jameson's elaboration, in the "Postmodernism" essay preeminently, of a specifically Hegelian "sublime"—on which, more shortly—is only one instance or "moment" of his career-long engagement with Hegel. The persistence of Jameson's Hegelianism, against the grain of a diversely anti-Hegelian age (Lévi-Strauss, Althusser, Foucault, Lyotard, Derrida) is a topic worth more space than I can give it here. Jameson has hailed, then prophesied, a Hegel revival throughout his career, early (*M&F* ix) and late (*LM* 241, *ST* 3, *CT* 73–92, "GPI" 75–6). For my purposes here, Jameson's stubborn allegiance to Hegel illuminatingly instantiates, first, the success/failure problem, for Jameson, in an anti-Hegelian time, inverts Hegel's supposed "failure" as a "dialectical" enactment of the "failure imperative," thus implicitly redeeming it as a kind of success (*M&F* 44–9; more on this in the following chapter). The indictment that casts Hegel as a Panglossian ideologue of reactionary "optimism" ("History as slaughterbench" and "Golgotha of the Spirit" notwithstanding),<sup>7</sup> may apply to the post-1816 Hegel, court philosopher to the restored Prussian state; but Jameson's Hegel aligns rather with Herbert Marcuse's *Reason and Revolution*, which credits the younger Hegel's potent vision of "the negative" with giving radical social theory (Marx and after) its birth.<sup>8</sup> Jameson's Hegel is the prophet of the necessity (in the Hegel quotation Slavoj Žižek has appropriated for the title of a recent book) of "tarrying with the negative" (*Phenomenology of Spirit* 19).

It is in the spirit of "tarrying with the negative" that Jameson projects his various Hegel-inflected imperatives: not as sure-thing recipes for critical success, or foolproof dialectical panaceas, but rather, on the contrary, as burdens to be borne,

“impossible tasks” whose “inevitable failure” attests, in Hegel’s formula, “the labor and the suffering of the negative” (*PU* 284).<sup>9</sup> The pathos of such a project as, for example, resisting “thematization” is that it is a doomed wish, not an assured goal: Jameson must traffic in “positions,” his writing must suffer “thematization,” just as T. S. Eliot’s Sweeney has got to use words when he talks to you. In 1971, in response to Susan Sontag, Deleuze/Guattari and others clamoring “against interpretation,” Jameson advised that “we are condemned to interpret at the same time that we feel an increasing repugnance to do so” (*ITI* 6), and this hair-shirt ethos animates Jameson’s critical programs generally. If “theory” typically denounces “totalization” as the (Hegelian) wetdream of a crypto-totalitarian will-to-power, Jameson recasts it as a necessary facing-up to the nightmare of the “total system” we inhabit (*LM* 26–7; *P* 331ff). If Hegelian historicism is “demystified” as a sinister conjuring of “master narratives,” Jameson’s “Always historicize!” is advice for an underdog revolutionary tradition—for the slave, not the master—and the narrative it uncovers, that of “the determinate failure of all the revolutions that have taken place in human history” (*PU* 102), is the reverse of triumphalist. (Note that this comment, from 1981, renders an adverse judgment on the Russian Revolution ten years before the break-up of the U.S.S.R.) In Jameson, “providential” metanarratives invert nightmarishly (as when the “subject of History” turns out to be neither Absolute Spirit nor the proletariat, but “capital itself” [*P* 410; cf. *IT2* 72, *PU* 93n71]). If recent narrative theory tends to project narrative *as such* as “deterministic,” Jameson’s response less contests those narratological premises than exploits them to dramatize, even magnify, his own projection of the “ideological closures” a historicizing, that is, narrativizing critique must face.

And metanarrative apart, Jameson is alive to another resonance of Hegel’s “historicism,” one Hegel summons in the word “vanishing”: History as simply that implacable resistless force before which all seeming fixities must transform and disappear. Jameson’s 1973 essay, “The Vanishing Mediator; or, Max Weber as Storyteller” [*IT2* 3–34], for example, broods over Weber’s brilliant, but time-bound, explanatory category, “Protestantism”; but the libidinal force of the essay’s prose is to agitate the anxious subtext that Marxism and its conceptual instruments, too, might be “vanishing” (and not in the withering-away or beginning of history sense so optimistically projected by Marx). One of Jameson’s oftenest quoted remarks—for many it serves as a sort of motto for his work generally—mourns that “History is what hurts” (*PU* 102). History giveth, and History taketh away—and if the axiom, ambivalently, stirs both hope and despair, Jameson’s evocations of “historicizing” problems and/or solutions usually accent the desperation rather than the hopefulness. Not for nothing are “tragic” and “stoic” terms of praise in his assessment of Lacan (*ITI* 98, 112)—terms whose bleakness suggests

something of the motivation, both as thematic investment and as “textual effect” or writing practice, of Jameson’s projection of “the sublime.”

Jameson’s wish to exempt himself (and Hegel) from charges of a facile optimism has more specific ideological motivations as well. The official Hegelianism of Soviet Marxism inscribed an official optimism, a dogma of “inevitable success” from which Jameson’s own rhetorical imperative of “inevitable failure” registers an emphatic dissent. Thus Jameson reads Althusser’s anti-Hegelianism as a coded anti-Stalinism (*PU* 27n12);<sup>10</sup> for Western (that is, Hegelian) Marxists, a pessimistic reading of Hegel was meant to countervail the fraudulent party-line optimism (Adorno is the best example, Lukács the most problematic). Which of course raises a question about Marx himself: Marx is among the greatest of triumphalist rhetoricians, yet Jameson typically mobilizes him, too, for “pessimistic” (rhetorical) purposes. Read by that light, Jameson’s “Hegel” begins to look like a figure for the “optimism,” the utopian hope that, in connection with Marx, Jameson reflexively renounces. (Jameson has recently hinted as much in a passage preferring “the Marx of the *Grundrisse* . . . more than of the more triumphalist passages of *Capital*” [“AEM” 172].) And I will add that the enthusiasm Jameson displays for Hegel, career-long, is nowhere matched in his work by a comparable enthusiasm, I mean a *libidinal* enthusiasm, a palpable *excitement*, for Marx. If Jameson’s “Hegel” is a vehicle for the repressed utopian moment in Marx, Jameson’s “Marx” may figure, reciprocally, as a screen for or repression of a much more immediate and profound engagement with, even something like a “guilty pleasure” in, Hegel. Jameson cites Lyotard’s phrase, “the desire called Marx,” but part of the mystique of that desire, for Jameson and many others, is (to recur to what will become a familiar formula), its “impossibility.” In Hegel Jameson evidently beholds something more like “the lineaments of gratified desire.”

The “stoic” or “tragic” effect, or affect, of Jameson’s prose, its frequent tone of melancholy and anguish, also implies an oblique critique of (or at least takes pains to differentiate itself from) much of the “theory” with which many associate Jameson. Much of the theory mood of the late 1960s and 1970s was set by slogans and code-words of release and consumption—“*plaisirs du texte*,” “*jouissance*,” “*écriture*,” “polyglossia,” “carnavalesque,” “free play,” “infinite interpretation,” “decentering”—not to mention the almost infinitely extensible list of apocalyptic “end of(s): end of metaphysics, end of “man,” end of history, of the subject, of literature, of philosophy, critique, Marxism . . . Jameson shares the utopian longings of theory, but his own more fastidiously pained writing implicitly renounces such enthusiasm as at best premature, at worst an unseemly bourgeois complacency while the revolution still suffers its time on the cross (see “The Ideology of the Text” [1976], *ITI* 17–71). Theory’s fetishization of “play,” its largely unwitting

reinscription of a neo-Schillerian “aesthetic consciousness,” receives its critique in Jameson’s very *tone*, in “the labor and the suffering of [Jameson’s] negative.” Schiller elsewhere gets his due, in Jameson’s pages on Schiller’s most consequential Western Marxist disciple, Herbert Marcuse (*M&F* 83–116); but the difficulty, the *askesis*, of Jameson’s writing effects a kind of prophylaxis against the naivetés or complacencies to which the rhetoric of *plaisir* and *jouissance* has been all too liable.

But on the other hand, “pessimism” too can become a trap, a “false consciousness,” a defeatism that forecloses revolutionary or utopian possibilities.<sup>11</sup> Jameson worries about this dilemma of left criticism, too, citing (for example) Sartre’s caution that “Vice . . . is a taste for failure” (*PHL* 178), or Baudrillard’s taunt that “the Left wants to lose” (*P* 333)—admonitions the more pointed for a writing that labors (suffers) under a self-imposed “failure imperative,” and what Jameson will eventually protest as the “winner loses logic” (*P* 5) it entails.<sup>12</sup> Must analysis of ideological closure become confirmation of it? Jameson’s “what hurts” ethos evokes this anxiety almost continuously; but he also occasionally warns against letting it pass all the way over into a kind of “post-Marxism” (for example, his remarks on the Marxist architectural historian Manfredo Tafuri [*IT2* 37–9, *P* 60, *CT* 177–83]). Here “post-Marxism” is a Marxism too gloomily persuaded of its own inevitable failure; worse yet, of course, is the kind that prematurely, and with audible satisfaction, speaks of Marxism as finished, a phase we have outgrown (*IT2* 133; on talk of Jameson’s own supposed “post-Marxism,” see his comments in *P* 297–8, adapted from Kellner 369–71; on “post-Marxisms” as a recurring feature of Marxism’s agon with capitalism, see “AEM” *passim*).

But it is time to bring these rather abstract Hegelian overdeterminations back to bear on the textures of Jameson’s writing itself. I will forego the comparison/contrast of Jameson’s “dialectical sentences” with Hegel’s own;<sup>13</sup> but I will recall that it was Hegel who first put the problem of how “dialectical” writing should be written on modernity’s agenda. Jameson has recently traced the

situational origins of . . . theoretical discourse in the general crisis of philosophy after Hegel . . . [which inaugurated] a way of describing the philosophical dilemmas it renders as a kind of ‘form-problem,’ whose resolution is sought in a certain set of procedures, or rather, in a certain set of taboos (“MPL” 79–80/31–2).

Note that thus put, the “form-problem” involves a success/failure dynamic: the potential hubris of theory’s “procedures” chastened by the specter of its “taboos.” Hegel’s “Preface” to the *Phenomenology* announces a philosophical project, *and* prose, aimed at “freeing determinate thoughts from their fixity . . . to bring fixed thoughts into a fluid state” (Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* 20)—an obvious

avatar for Jameson's critical or dialectical ambition as writer, to undo "reification" or "thematization," which is to say, to undo, breach, or open the "closure" of ideology itself.

The irony—the so-fertile “contradiction”—is that Jameson's prose must labor as mightily to evoke the “fixity” as to undo it. It is as if, stylistically, his “dialectical sentences” must enact Lukács's thesis in *History and Class Consciousness* according to which Kant is the “bourgeois” philosopher whose “analytic” master-trope of steady-state “antinomy” only the Hegelian “dialectic” can reframe as social “contradiction,” temporalizing, historicizing, and thus restoring the possibility (and the “Freedom”) of change to what Kant had eternalized as static and immutable “Necessity.” In Lukács, Kantian “antinomy” is a virtual figure for “reification”; Hegel himself had assimilated it to the merely “reflective” impasse of “bad infinity.”<sup>14</sup> But, again, these Kant/Hegel binaries (antinomy/contradiction, analytic/dialectic, ideology/utopia) function in Jameson as terms less for a *solution* of the problems of critique and of culture, than for the *statement*, the fuller problematization, of them—as well, indeed, for the evocation of something more affective and more tangled, at once the felt anguish of the ideological problem and the urgency (promise, hope, desire) of the utopian solution.

This tension operates everywhere in Jameson, though the emphases fall differently in different works, in different phases of his career. Think, for example, of *The Prison-House of Language* (1971), whose titular metaphor warns *against* precisely the trap of “ideological closure” such later works as *The Political Unconscious* (1981) will gloomily confirm. (Jameson even cites, as a telling symptom, structuralism's “unhappy consciousness on the stylistic level” [PHL 209]; in *The Political Unconscious*, he will prescribe such a textual effect—a “vision” of “inevitable failure”—as a sine qua non of critique as such [PU 101–2].) The chapters to follow will narrativize or historicize this career-long process, tracing a trajectory from the relative “optimism” of, for example, *Marxism and Form* (1971), dating from a period when capitalism seemed shakier than at any time since the 1930s, to the darker “stoic” or “tragic” effects (the “stylistic unhappy consciousness”) of *The Political Unconscious* (1981) and other of Jameson's late-1970s to early-1980s writing, written when the ravages of Brezhnev, and the portents of Reagan/Thatcher, were becoming clear. (An irony here is the coincidence of the Soviet bloc's decline and fall with the success of Jameson's own professional fortunes.)<sup>15</sup> Overlaying this historicizing scheme is the narrative of Jameson's changing genre motivations: *Marxism and Form* is a work of (utopian) homage to canonical Western Marxists; the later works brood on the premise of cultural production precisely *as* instantiation of “ideological closure” itself. By the end of the 1970s, in works like *Fables of Aggression* (1979) and *The Political Unconscious* (1981),

Jameson is projecting “ideological closure” as seamless, and its unreachability as an article of faith (or rather despair), a motivation, a premise, indeed, as we have seen, a “vision” incumbent on “dialectical” effort as such (*PU* 102).

Under the compulsion of such “visions of Necessity,” the “failure imperative” becomes a kind of “necessity-effect,” and Jameson’s writing, both in theme and practice, suffers an increasing desperation till, in the crucial “Postmodernism” essay (1984), Jameson himself protests its “winner loses logic” (*P* 5). The “stoic” and “tragic” impasses of “inevitable failure” and “impossible task” have become intolerable, and it is at this juncture in Jameson’s career that “the sublime” appears in his writing, both as a richly, if conflictedly, fertile figure or vehicle for various thematics of “the postmodern,” but also as a “textual effect” of the Jamesonian *scriptible* or “dialectical sentences” in which those thematics must achieve or assay their verbalization in written form. In the “Postmodernism” essay, Jameson projects the classical Burkean and Kantian “sublime” as, at once, a figure of critique’s predicament *and* of its “relief” in “euphoria” and “joyous intensities” (*P* 28–9)—a move that compounds a Kantian (antinomic) “sublime” with a “subl(im)ation” bearing inflections from the Hegelian to the Freudian and beyond. “Postmodernism” was read by many as a sort of manifesto, an announcement that bad old modernism was dead, and we, its former hostages, were now liberated to pursue new and unprecedented prospects of *jouissance*. But “the sublime” the essay conjured, and the hopes and dreads invested in it, were more conflicted than that; and within a decade, Jameson would again be talking darkly of “The *Antinomies* [my emphasis] of Postmodernity” (*ST* 1–71).

I read “the sublime” in Jameson’s oeuvre as what Kenneth Burke would call a “summarizing term”: it culminates Jameson’s longstanding preoccupation—his version of theory’s “crisis of representation”—with the problem, the “impossible task,” of representing the unrepresentable. From *Marxism and Form* on, it is the program of his “Marxist hermeneutic” to evoke “the [vast text of the] social,” the “absent [expressive/structural] cause,” the “totality,” for which Jameson, throughout his career, invents, borrows, or adapts such figures as “ideological closure,” “History itself,” “the [Lacanian] Real,” “the political unconscious,” the “world system” or “administered universe”—even, indeed, as if on some plane meta- to all of these, the dialectic itself. Of all these figures of the “unrepresentable,” “the sublime” offers a sublimation—at once a culmination and a relief—of critique’s dilemmas of representation, and of the success/failure dialectic or “winner loses logic” in which critique is fatedly entailed. “The sublime” brings to Jameson’s chronic preoccupations a quite new inflection: formerly, for all the impossibility of the task of presenting the “absent,” representing the unrepresentable, Jameson maintained, in the writing, something of that “linguistic optimism” he singles out

as the effect, the “style” indeed, of his first model Jean-Paul Sartre (*S*208). As “ideological closure” became more oppressively his topic, the accents turned “stoic” and “tragic,” but still without foregoing some sense of “linguistic optimism” persisting. With “the sublime,” the crisis of representation at last suffers the antinomic *non plus*, the limit beyond which, if he cannot interpret what he cannot represent, Jameson must (if only temporarily) abandon hermeneutic itself. Characteristically, though, Jameson sounds this moment of anti-hermeneutic rather in the register of despair than of that “bliss” conjured by anti-hermeneutics from Barthes and Deleuze/Guattari to Susan Sontag.

Since “the sublime” is a salient term of this study’s title, let me underline a crucial caveat: I present Jameson’s “sublime” as one phase—a crucial and in many ways culminating one, but still only *one* phase—of a long and diverse career. I do not mean, always and everywhere, to reduce (or inflate) Jameson’s success/failure dialectic to “the sublime.” “The sublime” connotes as theme, and performs as textual effect, an affect of bewildering engulfment, of boundaries overrun; my resort to a “narrativization” here, taken in full cognizance of narrative’s quaint out-of-date-ness, is meant to assign the thematic of “the sublime” its proper “moment” in Jameson’s career, to keep it from overflowing what came before it, and what comes after (for a return to hermeneutic and related problematics does indeed transpire, as we shall see, in Jameson’s writing of the 1990s). On the other hand, “stoic” and “tragic” are *not* terms strictly discriminable either as meanings in Jameson’s usage, nor as moments of any narrativization of his career; their accents appear *passim*, and bleed into each other *ad lib*. Likewise “linguistic optimism,” always in tension with them, and only the more dialectically so with “the sublime,” since the latter, in the unstable way of Freud’s “antithetical” motifs, can function at one moment as the absolute other of linguistic optimism, at another as its very euphoria or *intensité*.

I stage the collision of “ideological closure” with “the sublime,” then, as one of the more extreme (even “sublime”) episodes in the drama of Jameson’s oeuvre, because its vocabulary and connotations gave Jameson the highest voltages he had yet found with which to cathex a conflict that had been chronic and recurrent from *Sartre* (1961) on: the drama of the “failure imperative” itself, of the antinomic rigor of Kantian problems in unremitting agon with the dialectical (Hegelian) “neutralizations” necessary for “the production of utopian discourse” (*IT*2 75–102); the success and failure of critique itself as a “utopian discourse”; of “dialectical analysis,” of “Marxist hermeneutic,” of “transcoding,” “cognitive mapping,” and sundry other Jamesonian projects of various scopes and longevities; of elected heroes (Sartre, Barthes, Adorno, Lacan, even Wyndham Lewis)—of whatever vehicle is carrying the weight of Jameson’s own critical ambitions at a given

moment, in a given book or essay, on a given page, in a given sentence. Which is why the career-narrative I have been outlining will function in this book less as a “thesis,” a “conclusion” all evidence will be marshalled to confirm, than as a premise, or point of departure, against which Jameson’s ambitions, continuously evolving, continuously projecting for themselves ever more exorbitant criteria of success and failure, will be put to the test, or rather shown to be putting themselves to the test, of those “dialectical sentences” Jameson is always writing.

It is hard to know how to name the satisfactions of reading those sentences. “Eloquence” hardly sounds right, especially given Jameson’s affinity for avant-garde repudiations of art, beauty, and the like, “as usual,” his sympathy with “anti-aesthetics” from Flaubert, Dreiser, and Lewis to the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets, video art, and beyond. My own sense of Jameson’s intellectual formation in the 1950s leads me to associate the peculiar energy of his writing with the reckless precisions of Glenn Gould or the dishevelled elegances of Franz Kline. Jameson’s prose can look slap-dash, but don’t be fooled: a comparison of, for example, earlier and later versions of the “Postmodernism” essay discloses that Jameson revises heavily, and in such a way as to augment polysemy, suggestiveness, and penumbral “effect” to the disadvantage of such conventional stylistic desiderata as expository clarity or cadenced closures.<sup>16</sup>

So Jameson’s is an “eloquence” whose distance from eloquence-as-usual is part of its point, and if “eloquence” seems not the *mot juste*, Jameson himself suggests an alias drawn from the opening pages of Roland Barthes’s *S/Z*: the “*scriptible*”—a word perhaps calculated to evade the connotations both of “eloquence” and of that other Barthesian word whose appropriation by “theory” Jameson so clearly regrets, “*écriture*.” I want to close by quoting a passage which displays the self-consciousness, and the libidinal volatility, of the success/failure theme, a passage in which Jameson evokes Barthes in a way that at once offers homage to Barthes, acknowledges—or claims—Barthes as a model (so that what the passage says about Barthes it also invites us to measure against Jameson himself), and rewrites Barthes, to evoke a Barthes virtually remade in Jameson’s own image. Moreover, the passage broods over the word “*scriptible*” itself, in a way that both asserts its attraction for Jameson as a reader, and confesses *scriptibilité* as an ambition of Jameson’s own as a writer. “Eloquence” or not, the passage is by any standard (and the relevant standards would include Adorno, Heidegger, Foucault and Derrida, as well as Barthes) a pretty fancy piece of writing, and I don’t see how we can credit any reading of Jameson that fails to recognize that something like a kind of eloquence is here as in so many places in Jameson, very self-consciously the aim. The passage comes from the “Introduction” to Jameson’s 1992 collection of essays on film, *Signatures of the Visible*:



Barthes thought certain kinds of writing—perhaps we should say, certain kinds of *sentences*—to be *scriptible*, because they made you wish to write further yourself; they stimulated imitation, and promised a pleasure in combining language that had little enough to do with the notation of new ideas. But I think he thought this because he took an attitude toward those sentences which was not essentially linguistic, and had little to do with reading: what is scriptible indeed is the visual or the musical, what corresponds to the two outside senses that tug at language between themselves and dispute its peculiarly unphysical attention, its short circuit of the sentences for the mind itself that makes of the mysterious thing reading some superstitious and adult power, which the lowlier arts imagine incomprehendingly, as animals might dream of the strangeness of human thinking. We do not in that sense read painting nor do we hear music with any of the attention reserved for oral recitation; but this is why the more advanced and rational activity can also have its dream of the other, and regress to a longing for the more immediately sensory, wishing it could pass altogether over into the visual, or be sublimated into the spiritual body of pure sound.

Scriptible is not however the poetry that actually tries to do that (and which is then itself condemned to the technical mediation of a relationship to language not much more “poetic” than the doctrine of the coloration of orchestral instruments and the specialized, painfully acquired knowledge of their technologies); it is the prose stimulated by the idea of sound, or the sentences that something visual—unfortunately, our only word for it is the *image*—calls into being by suggestion and by a kind of contamination. We don’t write about these things, it is not a metaphorical representation that the sensory pretext summons but rather something related by affinity, that prolongs the content of the object in another, more tenuous form, as though to prolong a last touch with the very fingertips (*SV* 2–3).

This is emphatically *not* academic prose as usual; if it were, for one thing, a much shorter excerpt would have sufficed to communicate its point. But the point here is that there is no (single) “point,” though the passage at first seems on its way to making one (something about Barthes’s notion of reading); rather, by the time we come to “that adult and superstitious power,” the dumb animals wondering at human abilities they can only dream of, while the humans for their part idealize the animal sensuality from which they feel cut off, we are clearly reading a prose concerned not to *préciser*, as the French say, an expository nuance but rather to evoke a desire whose dwelling place, we are told (and this is almost the one thing in the passage that could be thought of as “statement”), is not precisely *in* language (ponder the heretical implications of this, in our age of the “linguistic turn”) but somehow alongside it, not properly “linguistic” but paralinguistic, inhabiting a sort of

penumbra of language, a shadow or force-field within which, or to the extent of which, those “outside senses” (“visual” and “musical”) continuously try to “tug” language out of the accustomed courses of an ambit determined by the semantic’s tragic mis-taking of itself for the somatic . . .

A kind of poetry? No, the passage goes on to stipulate that the *scriptible* is precisely *not* “the poetry that actually tries to do that,” but is rather a “prose stimulated by the *idea*” (not the sensory experience?) of a sound or a vision, hinting self-consciously here at a (Luciferian/Baudelairean) impurity (“contamination”) profaning the very ethos of the binaries (human/animal, idea/senses, abstract/concrete) that had underwritten the effects of the preceding paragraph, to evoke a *beyond*, or a *both/land*, where ideas and the senses somehow achieve a contact otherwise impossible, a touch otherwise categorically proscribed. This is a longing palpable as well in *Late Marxism*, a longing for a (Hegelian) *tertium quid*, a near-Platonic *chora* or “substance” of resolution, for a progress or at least the glimpse of a possibility *beyond* the antinomies of sensual and intelligible, perceptual and conceptual, particular and abstract, whose terms have dominated (and sundered) our culture’s thought and feeling for two centuries and more, severing “the aesthetic” from “ontology” (except, indeed, when either is being denounced as an unwitting version of the other), rather than enabling some “reconciliation” or *Aufhebung* of their dilemmas, limitations, foreclosures. (Hegelian associations here inflect Wordsworthian ones.) An impossible desire, of course; even more impossible a task—which is presumably why “We don’t write about these things”: though here Jameson *is*, writing about them, deploying the word “*image*” (in italics) only in default, as he complains, of a better one, the whole ending on a complexly elegiac note, “as though to prolong a last touch with the very fingertips.”

Longing, regret, nostalgia, “inevitable failure” sheerly as mood: the sorrow of that “last touch with the very fingertips” compounded by its mere figurality (if the fingertips are “very,” the touch itself is only an “as though”)—surely this is a *scriptible* with little of Barthes’s insouciance and exuberance; and that very distance attests the passage’s suggestiveness as a kind of program piece for a Jamesonian *scriptible* that yearns for an effect unique and unprecedented (and impossible), some intellectual-imaginative-affective “flow” or *intensité* never before catheted in prose or verse, like the light that never was on land or sea, right down to the Wordsworthian (con)fusion of longing for what never will be with nostalgia for what never was. And all this announced as the (impossible) ambition, confessed as the (unrealizable) desire, of a project not generically “literary” but rather *critical*: we are, after all, reading the introduction to a collection of essays on film.

Some will complain that this is making too much of a purple passage; but I don’t see how a sensitive reading of Jameson can avoid asking what, in a passage

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like this, the nostalgic, sorrowful tone of the announcement of program imports for the program itself. Is critique a diminished thing if it fails of the effects Jameson proposes for it here? But just what is it that motivates these effects? Or, more pertinently, which is motivation, which device? Isn't the ineffability the point? Aren't these effects projected as impossible to begin with?—and isn't the evocation of that impossibility, that impotence, that necessary failure, precisely the measure of the passage's power and "effect"?—in short, its peculiar, unlooked-for success?

Jameson's writing seems to me to dramatize itself continually with agitations of this sort, and increasingly as his career proceeds. However fine the cut between (call it) utopia and ideology, Jameson's resourceful prose endeavors to belabor every infinitesimal, every transferential relay of that difference or *différance*, that continuum/discontinuum dividing but also joining desire and terror, success and failure—orchestrating a continual slow-motion turbulence of immovable ideological objects in agon with irresistible utopian force. Which is why (again) I project "success or failure" in Jameson not as a chronic theme, a libidinal rhythm or refrain, or a thetic QED to be underlined as often as possible, but rather as the largest terms possible in or against which Jameson dramatizes his own project, testing, trying, interrogating the very possibility of critique in the sentence-by-sentence activity of (his) writing it and (our) reading it—a resourceful, ingenious, continuously surprising proof or probe of the chances of critical ("dialectical") thinking itself, in a writing whose improbable (impossible?) success is to make of its own failure the most trenchant possible critique of culture.