

Fredric JAMESON, *Inventions of a Present. The Novel in Its Crisis of Globalization*, Verso, 2024, ISBN-13: 978-1-80429-240-2, 264 p.

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Renowned as a Marxist theorist and a key figure in Postmodernist theory, Fredric Jameson shows a different face of himself in one of his last book, *Inventions of a Present: The Novel in Its Crisis of Globalization*, published by Verso in May 2024. A collection of essays on novels, ranging from the works of Joseph Conrad and Henry James to those of Margaret Atwood and Karl Ove Knausgård, and brought together at Perry Anderson's suggestion, *The Inventions of a Present...* reveals a Jameson who is both a literary critic and a cultural and political theorist – two facets that rarely converged in his previous works, except for his study on Sartre (originally his PhD thesis, *Sartre: The Origins of a Style*, 1961) and his analysis of Raymond Chandler's detective fiction (*Raymond Chandler: The Detections of Totality*, 2016).

Originally published mostly in the *New Left Review* and the *London Review of Books*, but also in lesser-known journals such as *College English*, *Minnesota Review*, *Criticism*, and *Henry James Review*, these essays span fifty years, from 1972 (*College English*) to 2022 (*London Review of Books*). All the essays compiled in this volume seek to move away from what Jameson terms “vulgar Marxism” (4). He argues that it “has left its scars, particularly on what American intellectuals feel a Marxist interpretation of literary works sets out to do” (4), by reducing works of art to socio-economic reflexes and viewing aesthetic judgement with suspicion.

One of the book's significant aims, and the unifying theme of the nineteen essays included in this volume, is to establish a dialectic akin to that proposed by the early representatives of the Frankfurt School—one that reconciles content, or what makes literature a socio-economic document within a Marxist reading, with form, which elevates literature to the status of art. This is encapsulated in what Jameson briefly

refers to in the *Introduction* as “a materialist formalism” (3), which he argues is the only approach capable of adequately capturing “the profound historicity” (3) of the novels under consideration.

A good example is Vasily Grossman’s *Life and Fate*, completed in the 1950s in Russia but published only in 1980, after the author’s death, first in Switzerland and later, in the late 1980s, in Russia. In discussing Grossman’s work, the author of *Inventions of a Present...* analyses it through the lens of formalist materialism, acknowledging that the cultural and historical context in which Grossman wrote *Life and Fate* shapes the narrative both structurally and existentially. According to Jameson, Western writers could never have produced such a book because it is the experience of the Great Patriotic War, as lived in Russia, that gives shape to Grossman’s historical novel about the family of a Soviet physicist. “For only the content enables the possibility of form” (141), Jameson asserts, while affirming the primacy of content over form, as well as the anti-universalist nature of both the novel in question and the historical novel as a genre.

Another common feature of the books examined in this volume is their historicity. Although Jameson’s claim that “all novels are historical” (1) may seem audacious, aiming to encompass and encapsulate literature as a monolithic entity, he highlights, in a poststructuralist manner, that the “present” in literature is always a construct shaped by the reader. This notion is introduced in the epigraph with a quote from Stéphane Mallarmé and reiterated in the opening line of the Introduction with the following assertion: “The scholar longs for a tiger’s leap into the past; the book reviewer for flashes of the present” (1). From modernist writers such as Henry James to contemporary masters of autofiction like Karl Ove Knausgård, the thread that connects over a century of literature and blurs the boundaries between the three temporal categories through which Jameson reads literature—realism, modernism, and postmodernism—is the overarching structure of the historical novel, a genre often deemed outdated today.

What Jameson terms the historical novel serves as an implicit or explicit political and social commentary on a “contemporary” way of life, whether referring to works written and published in the 21st century or to those from earlier periods, whose historical contexts can be reactivated and remain relevant to the present. Whether

focused on the American, Russian, German, or another context, Jameson's conception of the historical novel is both rooted in and divergent from the tradition established by Georg Lukács in *The Historical Novel* (University of Nebraska Press, 1955). For Lukács, historical prose centres on a moderate hero, capable of "suffering history's lightning strikes and surviving in some memorable form" (1). In contrast, Jameson's historical novel opposes autofiction—a genre popular today—by seeking not to explore the private dimension of existence and memory, but the public and collective dimension of life.

A brief critique can be made of the essay included in Chapter 15, titled "The Novel and the Market," originally published in 2018 in the *London Review of Books*. Here, Jameson examines the sixth part of Karl Ove Knausgård's *My Struggle* (2011). Jameson's dismissal of autofiction and his attempt to reinterpret Knausgård's work through a postmodern lens—describing its style as "itemisation" (203), defined as the listing of "unoriginal reactions and psychic events" (203)—feels strained, adding a superficial layer of interpretation to the text. Moreover, this reading contradicts itself, given that memory—particularly private and personal memory—plays a central role in autofiction and is placed by Jameson at the heart of Knausgård's work. This is exemplified in a scene where the narrator strolls through a supermarket, selecting various items for his cart:

(...) it would be dishonest to leave this passage without saying that it includes history, that it is preceded by the memory that there were once at least five or six kinds of bread with their own names, and followed with a memory of the supermarket of his childhood and what that was like, before it returns to the present day as he picks up a carton of milk, etc. (202)

The historical novel, as envisioned by the author of *Inventions of a Present...*, no longer centres on the classical opposition between individual and society, nor on the concept of protagonicity. Instead, it seeks "to register the crisis of the individual" (2) while attempting to depict collective life. In this regard, Jameson distances himself from the traditional notion of representation, advocating instead for a dynamic understanding of the novel as an "act" and an "intervention" in the social sphere. This perspective aligns

with the tradition of the Frankfurt School and reflects the influence of Theodor W. Adorno on Jameson's thought.

At the outset of the book, Jameson poses a question that the volume seeks to address: how should a Marxist critic approach, on the one hand, "prepolitical literature in political terms" (27), and, on the other, literature whose historical context is contemporary and therefore requires no explanation? The term "prepolitical" appears somewhat problematic in a work that begins by asserting the unity of "all novels" within a single genre while engaging with the ideology of aesthetics and the politics of apolitical literature. However, two interpretations of the term can be derived from Jameson's arguments. Firstly, "prepolitical literature" refers to modernist literature, which, for Jameson, often operates as an autonomous enclave detached from the world, the social forces governing it, and even from qualia. Secondly, it encompasses literature beyond the modernist moment, which Jameson does not categorise as postmodernist. This literature remains ideologically unconscious, existing in an idyllic space seemingly outside or prior to the political.

A compelling example of how the blindness of the writer can be supplanted by the Marxist consciousness of the reader is James Dickey's *Deliverance*, described by Jameson as "the wilderness novel." Published in 1970, it is analysed in contrast to Norman Mailer's *Why Are We in Vietnam*, a novel from 1967. While *Deliverance* portrays a group of men attempting to escape the monotony of middle-class life through a wilderness expedition, *Why Are We in Vietnam* centres on a wealthy father and his son's hunting trip in Alaska. Both novels reflect American society through a direct, non-representational lens and utilise nature as both a refuge and a symptom of middle-class frustration. However, Jameson argues, Mailer's approach is explicit, consciously articulating class ideology, whereas Dickey is ensnared by liberalism, unaware that he is "possessed" by "social terrors" (12). Consequently, *Deliverance* functions not as a critique of ideological illusions but as an unmediated expression of political and social desires.

The events in *Deliverance*—including the rape of two men from the group by strangers emerging from the woods, the murder of one attacker, Ed's homicidal thoughts about Bobby, and the mysterious death of one of the friends—ultimately see three men returning to their previous lives. Today, these plot points might evoke a

poorly conceived, clichéd Hollywood movie. However, as Jameson observed in his 1972 essay published in *College English*, they also reflect a liberal view of the middle class as the representative of societal good—a good that ultimately triumphs in the end:

James Dickey's novel is thus a fantasy about class struggle in which the middleclass American property owner wins through to be a happy ending and is able, by reconquering his self-respect, to think of himself as bathing in the legendary glow of moderate heroism. (12)

In Jameson's account, the writer's attitude towards ideological content and their biographical details is not of paramount importance — “it does not ultimately matter whether Balzac was a reactionary, or whether Mailer is a sexist” (26) — because the writer's task is to transform ideological materials into “an object of aesthetic consciousness” (26). This does not imply that the writer's judgment must be conscious; rather, it becomes the task of the reader — always professionalised in Jameson's view — to contemplate the object, in this case the historical novel, as one imbued with aesthetic consciousness. Thus, as demonstrated in the analysis of Dickey's book, it is the responsibility of the Marxist critic, the teacher, or the student “to raise to consciousness that political and ideological infrastructure of literary works which is so often unconscious as far as the writer is concerned” (27).

A notable strength — and simultaneously a weakness — of Jameson's final book is that the theory of postmodernism, which made him internationally renowned, is scarcely addressed in the text. Its strength lies in Jameson's theoretical and critical clarity, which enables him to detach his literary analysis from his own theoretical framework. Its weakness, however, lies in its acknowledgment that postmodernist theory, like any theoretical framework, is not universally applicable. It neither encompasses all literature produced since the 1960s nor possesses the capacity to view literature dialectically, as both a form of life and a form of art.

Jameson reads literature through three frameworks: realism, modernism, and postmodernism. However, these distinctions present an issue, as they allow little room for impermeability or hybridity. For Jameson, the novel is realist at the end of the 19th century, modernist in the first half of the 20th century (up until World War II), and

postmodernist thereafter. He rarely questions the arbitrariness of these boundaries, conceptualising literary history as a progression in which a new form consistently replaces the old. The “moment of balance” (65), represented by the realist novel — a form tied to the nation-state — is followed by the “explosion of formal and narrative experiments we call modernism” (66), as the nation-state begins to disintegrate. This, in turn, gives way to postmodernism, which Jameson describes as “a symptom” operating within a larger context: the world system:

the older relations of imperialism and classical colonialism have been restructured into what must now be called the multinational “world” system of late capitalism, now grasped as a new stage in its own right. Here the principle of structural intelligibility is for the first time virtually completely invisible. (66)

This historical vision, while measured, paradoxically adopts a standard periodisation. It links modernism with the transition from content to form (155) but rarely considers the likelihood that multiple temporalities might coexist. In other words, modernism and postmodernism cannot coexist in Jameson’s framework, unlike in the thought of philosophers like Peter Osborne (*The Postconceptual Condition*, Verso, 2018), who argue for their simultaneity. When Jameson identifies a relationship between these temporalities within the same period, it is always antagonistic; one rejects the other. For instance, he argues that a genre like science fiction, represented by Margaret Atwood and William Gibson in this book, provides deeper insights into the contemporary world than either realism or modernism: science fiction “is sending back more reliable information about the contemporary world than an exhausted realism (or an exhausted modernism either)” (187).

Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* (2003), depicting a post-apocalyptic world dominated by corporations with their own systems of governance, stages contemporary anxieties about the privatisation of life. Similarly, Gibson’s *Pattern Recognition* (2003) centres on a character operating in a corporate world, whose heightened sensitivity to corporate symbols embodies late capitalism, global systems, and the forces shaping private life.

The only chapter where temporalities overlap is the one dedicated to *The Wire*, the American crime drama series created and written by David Simon for HBO, which

aired from 2002 to 2008. This chapter is quintessentially postmodern, blurring the boundaries between high and low culture while incorporating “exhausted” (187) temporalities like realism and modernism into its narrative structure. The chapter’s title, *The Autonomous Work of Art: Utopian Plot-Formation in The Wire*, reflects this integration.

The series defies the conventional mimetic realism concept, instead presenting a new form of realism that, according to Jameson, must constantly evolve to reflect emerging social dynamics. For instance, the drug-dealing organisation Barksdale, under police scrutiny, becomes a microcosm that “opens up a space for realism: for seeing things, finding out things, that have not been registered before” (80). Its modernism, on the other hand, is evident in its rejection of classical typologies. Furthermore, despite being mass culture — where “the formulaic” thrives, with audiences expecting familiar situations, plots, and character types (84-85) — *The Wire* avoids such repetition. Jameson links this refusal to Adorno’s theory of taboo in modernist literature, where certain elements are excluded because they have become overly sentimental.

In conclusion, while the exact aim of *Inventions of a Present. The Novel in Its Crisis of Globalization* may initially appear elusive — particularly given its broad scope, from Henry James to Karl Ove Knausgård — it is significant for at least two reasons. Firstly, it constructs a continuous “present” for literature that transcends arbitrary historical divisions such as modernism versus postmodernism, creating spaces for permeability between them. Secondly, it transforms historical narrative into a superstructure capable of encompassing diverse forms, from novels to science fiction and even television series.