

CODEWORD MODERNITY

‘MODERNITY’, BY WHICH I mean the word, has had an exceptionally good run for its money, but is now long past its sell-by date (the term has been used to peddle so many meretricious panaceas of late that the commercial metaphor for once seems apt). According to Fredric Jameson, the ‘project’—another label subject to intolerable abuse—is over.¹ It may, on more dignified Habermasian assumptions, be incomplete; but its incompleteness is merely a token that whatever promise it once bore is now definitively buried. It has become a modern form of ‘antiquity’.²

Yet something strange—singular—is going on. It is a notable feature of the burial that, in public discourse, there have been many recent attempts to resurrect the corpse, above all in the Third Way’s ‘modernizing’ of political parties, social services, labour markets and, lately, just war.³ This is doubtless the sort of thing that Jameson has in mind when he speaks of a ‘reminting’ of the ‘modern’ that takes the form of ‘intellectual regressions’. Jameson cites the corresponding example of Schroeder’s Germany and Oskar Lafontaine’s lament:

The words ‘modernization’ and ‘modernity’ have been degraded to fashionable concepts under which you can think anything at all. If you try to figure out what the people called ‘modernizers’ today understand under the term ‘modernity’, you find that it is little else than economic and social adaptation to the supposed constraints of the global market.⁴

The term thus becomes code for closing down alternatives to capitalism, a massive irony in that many of the links between modernity, modernization and modernism are often held to be unintelligible without reference to the utopian and revolutionary moments of socialism and communism.⁵ Modernity’s epitaph might well be the long goodbye to the hopes invested in that particular constellation, overwhelmed by the

final triumph of the alignment of the Enlightenment project with the imperatives of a market society, the name for whose contemporary ubiquitousness is now the consumerist blankness of the postmodern. In the mouths of today's politicians, the 'modern' is but the spectral trace of the fake re-enchantment of a thoroughly disenchanting world.

This 'abuse'—Jameson's word—of terms presumes, if not correct, then at least plausible uses, from which it deviates. The task to hand therefore calls for numerous theoretical and historical discriminations; and is complicated by the fact that the abusive invocations are not merely random or opportunistic. There is something in the appropriations themselves that tells how the processes they ideologically represent and foreclose were, if not destined, then likely to end up precisely here. Jameson is a past master in showing how apparently bankrupt terms nevertheless disclose something of the reality they cover with the blandishments of

¹ Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present*, London 2002.

² Burial rites have become something of a standard move recently; in connexion with modernism, T. J. Clark states that 'modernism is our antiquity . . . a ruin, the logic of whose architecture we do not remotely grasp': *Farewell to an Idea*, London 1999, p. 2.

³ See, for example, Tony Blair's argument, in a statement to the House of Commons on 29 April 1999, to the effect that, 'regret' for collateral damage marking one of the differences between a morally sensitive civilization and a barbaric culture, the fact that Britain regretted the killing of innocent civilians became part of the justification for killing them.

⁴ Jameson agrees entirely with this description but also notes caustically: 'It is clear from Lafontaine's plaintive accents here not only that he lost this fundamental discursive struggle, but that he was never aware of its fundamental nature and stakes in the first place'.

⁵ The moment of modernism, both its birth and its brutally rapid death, before and during the Russian Revolution and in the early years of the Soviet Union, are a major concern of both Clark's *Farewell to an Idea* and Susan Buck-Morss's *Dreamworld and Catastrophe*. In Jameson's text, Clark's book gets but one footnoted reference, although one suspects its shadow hovers, as the site of a major point of disagreement (focused on the differences between the pairs modernity/modernism and postmodernity/postmodernism). Unaccountably Buck-Morss's book gets no mention at all. Might there be some connexion here with Malcolm Bull's suggestion that, in fact, modernism and socialism have little in common: where modernism was resistant to modernity, but 'was only intermittently and obliquely opposed to capitalism', socialism was opposed to capitalism but entirely at home in the project of modernity. See 'Between the Cultures of Capital', NLR 11, September–October 2001, p. 97.

the ideological caress—most influentially in his reflections on how the vulgar uses of the term ‘postmodernity’ reflect the vulgarization of the contemporary life world. The same holds for the degraded afterlife of the term ‘modernity’. From one point of view, it is empty, drained of all substantial meaning, but from another—symptomatic—point of view, it is full, directing the mind, when not drugged by the incantatory repetition of the empty signifier, to a bitter reckoning with where we are now. How then to sort the wheat from the chaff, especially when in certain cases the chaff itself turns out to be, in however thin or poisonous a guise, a form of wheat?

Meanings and uses

Jameson’s undertaking is thus first and foremost an inquiry into the fortunes of a *word*: ‘Let’s say, to cut it short, that this will be a formal analysis of the uses of the word ‘modernity’ that explicitly rejects any presupposition that there is a correct use of the word to be discovered, conceptualized and proposed’. This is reminiscent of Raymond Williams’s attempt—in *Keywords*; which also has an entry for ‘modern’—to track social and cultural histories by way of historicized semantics. It is an approach vulnerable to methodological critique—as, for example, in Quentin Skinner’s reservations about Williams’s method, in particular his claim that the book’s restriction of its brief to a field of historical meanings elided the crucial distinction between ‘meaning’ and ‘reference’.⁶ This is, if in a somewhat different fashion, also a problem for Jameson. If meanings, especially ideologically congealed ones, obscure reality, we nevertheless have to deploy them as a bridgehead to provide some relation of reference to actual states of affairs—the latter identified, broadly, with capitalism: ‘the only satisfactory semantic meaning of modernity lies in its association with capitalism’. Jameson compares this to looking through a ‘pane of glass’; but whereas the metaphor normally signifies a principle of uncomplicated transparency (as in Sartre and Orwell), here it is the site of a frustration:

What is constitutively frustrating about such an analysis is that, like the pane of glass at which you try to gaze even as you are looking through it, you must simultaneously affirm the existence of the object while denying the relevance of the term that designates that existence.

⁶ Quentin Skinner, ‘Language and Social Change’, in James Tully, ed., *Meaning and Context*, Cambridge 1988, pp. 119–32.

The relevant action, therefore, is neither seeing transparently nor looking through a glass darkly, but one of simultaneous viewing, in which (analogous perhaps to Wittgenstein's duck-rabbit conundrum) you cannot take in both objects at once. The glass gets in the way even as it appears to permit a through-view. We are thus required to grasp what's out-there at once with, through and yet despite the word; as both aid and impediment, the 'notions that cluster around the word "modern" are as unavoidable as they are unacceptable'.

This take on semantics and what it is alleged to deliver doubtless requires further analytical honing, but it sets the stage for the difficulty of addressing the central question: what, against the multiple misuses and abuses of the term, is or was modernity? The difficulty arises because, posed thus, this proves to be a false trail. Jameson's is not an 'is' question, in the sense of the copula articulating an essence that can be subsumed under a single 'concept'—presumably, another intended sense of the term 'singular' in his title: 'modernity', whatever it might be taken to be, will be cast in the plural form. Part One of the book consists in the presentation of 'The Four Maxims of Modernity', the second of which is that: 'Modernity is not a concept but rather a narrative category'. Governed by various, more or less self-conscious tropes, discourses and ideologies, modernity is the stories we tell ourselves and others about it.

In this, Jameson again shares something with Raymond Williams who, in *The Politics of Modernism*, rehearsed the 'ratified' story of modernism—a tale retrospectively constructed via the mechanisms of the 'selective tradition', saturated with ideology and thus naturalizing itself as the only story in town. But where Williams identifies but one dominant narrative, subject to correction by a more embracing account that includes what the ratified version leaves out, Jameson highlights many, jostling against one another and with no ready means of adjudication to hand. This way with narrativization raises the problem of relativism (how to choose between competing stories), although Jameson has no difficulty in affirming some narratives as better than others; to this end his master-trope—but is it simply a trope?—is the 'dialectic'. Jameson's own story is buttressed by a very powerful theoretical armature—if not guided by a Concept, then underpinned by concepts galore. It remains nevertheless a story, if only in the minimalist sense of framing the principal question as a temporal one: displacing

it from abstract definition to historical location, from 'is' to 'when'; thus again echoing Williams's essay, 'When was Modernism?'

Permanently new?

'When', however, gets a guarded response, in the form of the double negative that structures Maxim Number One: 'We cannot not periodize'. Why the double negative, and how does this oddly phrased imperative apply to the thing called 'modernity'? Perhaps one reason for the odd phrasing is that there is a venerable tradition which claims, if only implicitly, that the imperative does not apply. Baudelaire identified the modern with the Now and, if not quite co-extensively then relatedly, with the New. This is an extension of Stendhal's account of the romantic, according to which all that is Now is by definition New: Racine, for the eighteenth and nineteenth century the archetype of the neoclassical old, was, in the conditions of seventeenth-century France, the New; a thought more generally activated in the late seventeenth-century *querelle des anciens et des modernes*.

This account of historical conditionality does not, of course, quite work: much that is produced in the here and now (for us, the there and then of history) is not new but a recycling of the old, a conservative gesture of preservation. But on the whole the formula has functioned self-servingly well, especially in certain versions of avant-gardist ideology. Modernity is simply what leaves or struggles to leave the past behind. Rimbaud's *Il faut être absolument moderne*—the title for Jameson's Conclusion—is not just a description of a state of affairs, but a prescriptive rallying call to where we ought to be, the overdetermining adverb expressive of the desire to wipe out the past completely; as will be Nietzsche's admonition to 'forget' the past in the name of an existential project of heroic-aristocratic self-refashioning.

This grand dream of what it is to be imperiously 'modern' shatters on the rocks of, among other things, Derrida's reflections on late-coming, also cited by Jameson. Derrida's 'always too late to talk about time' means that the idea of consigning a past from the vantage point of a pure present, an experience of irreducible nowness, is an illusion. What we call 'the present' is a dynamic cluster of temporal traces, of the past it has been and the future it is in process of becoming. Just as I can say 'here' without knowing where I am, I can say 'now' without knowing

what time it is; not because I do not have a clock to hand, but because the moment of the act distinguishing 'now' and 'then' is undone as the act is accomplished. Translated from the individual to the collective, the existential to the historical, today's modernity is, on the longer-haul view, tomorrow's antiquity.

This way a kind of madness lies: everything is what it is not, confounding both the Aristotelian logic of identity and difference and the Aristotelian aesthetic of beginning, middle and end. If it offers a tonically sceptical take on our overconfident way with temporality and historicity—the force of the first 'not' in Jameson's maxim, whose argument is supplied for us in the structuralist critique of historicism—it can also leave us stranded in the epistemological quicksands. Whence the force of the second 'not', which I take to be more than just the assertion of a pragmatic necessity in the teeth of radical scepticism. It is also a recognition that the equation of 'modern' with the Now and the New finally generates what it ostensibly represses: a form of historical framing, without which we capitulate to yet another regression—for succession, as just one goddamned thing after another, would be a 'reversion to the chronicle as a mode of storing and registering information'. Indeed, as Jameson points out, the equation is not itself modern, in the historical sense of what is specific to the culture of the last 150 years or so. It can be traced back to what we call late Antiquity: in the writings of Cassiodorus, the Latin *modernus* signified not just the past-effacing new, but also its substantive contrary *antiquas*. Periodization was thus written into the scenario from the word go.⁷

Ends and beginnings

What, then, if we continue to insist on a periodization, of both 'modernity' and its problematical cousin, 'modernism'? How might we circumscribe the historical parameters of each, along with their points of mutual contact? And how, in so doing, might we avoid the homogenizing implications of the least attractive aspect of Hegel's legacy of *Zeitgeist* history—what Jameson calls 'the usual formula'? Where, for example, to begin and end? Is modernity best understood as the 'project' described

⁷ Williams traces the association of the term 'modern' with periodization in English usage, from the sixteenth century onwards: *Keywords* (2nd edition), London 1983, p. 208. On the early usage of *modernus*, and the problems of thinking historically, see also Antoine Compagnon, *Les cinq paradoxes de la modernité*, Paris 1990.

by Habermas, issuing from the secular energies of the Enlightenment; or, as in the French usages described by Antoine Compagnon's *Les cinq paradoxes de la modernité*, centred on the post-Enlightenment discourses of 'nihilism'? Is there a 'good' and a 'bad' modernity, along the lines sketched by Marshall Berman in *All That is Solid Melts into Air*: the adventurous makings of the later eighteenth and the nineteenth century, as against the hollow, anaemic forms of the postwar period? Is 'modernism' most appropriately dated from somewhere in the late nineteenth century through to the onset of the Cold War, after which we enter, however variously defined and evaluated, the phase of 'postmodernity'? Or should it be taken further back, as Williams suggested, into the moment of 'realism', as well as outwards, to everything marginalized by the marketed image of the 'avant-garde'? Where you begin and end depends on the kind of story you want to tell; again, the ghost of relativism. In the case of beginnings, Jameson lists fourteen possible entries for a narrative incipit, adding mischievously that 'many more are lurking in the wings'; and that, whatever we do with them, 'the "correct" theory of modernity is not to be obtained by putting them all together in some hierarchical synthesis'.

What Jameson proposes instead is a kind of critical narratology with which to classify and analyse the organizing categories of the periodizing narratives of modernity. The principal forms and figures here include: continuity; discontinuity; break; and transition. Fleshing this schematic grid is a set of finer distinctions, although sometimes so fussily fine as to suggest that Polonius has wandered into the script. Thus we have not only the more or less standard pre, early, classical, high, late and post, but also unmodern, non-modern, anti-modern; along with the not immediately compelling 'less' and 'more' modern. Keeping track of all this places large demands on the synapses, especially when it takes us into such paradoxical descriptions as the unmodern as 'modernist' and the anti-modern 'remain[ing] modern in its very denial and resistance'. But if the text at times becomes rebarbatively labyrinthine, the main lines of the argument, while forbiddingly dense, are relatively clear. The prime figure is, of course, the break. Nearly all the main accounts, theoretical and polemical, of both modernity and modernism turn on the pivotal notion of a rupture, often of allegedly world-historical dimensions. This implicates Jameson's own story, above all his insistence that 'modernity', as a historiographic category, refers to something now definitively of the past—as posited by the 'postmodern break' of

his Fourth Maxim: 'No "theory" of modernity makes sense today unless it comes to terms with the hypothesis of a postmodern break with the modern'. (I will come to the Third Maxim at a later juncture.)

Break theory

The first break is, however, notoriously difficult to situate historically. Hegel places it at the end of Antiquity. Heidegger offers three breaks, as 'moments of the emergence of modernity': the shift from 'the Greek experience of Being' to 'Roman conceptual reification'; the subject-object split of seventeenth-century Cartesianism, initiating the regime of the World Picture; and the later apocalyptic account of the impact of technology. Foucault, in many ways Heidegger's successor in break-theory, also proposes a trio: the 'classical' (again represented by the seventeenth-century scientific revolution); the 'historicist-vitalist' moment of the nineteenth century; and finally, that shadowy horizon of a projected future that heralds the death of Man. The sheer number of candidates speaks of an obsession—one that we might properly call 'modernist'—but is also symptomatic of a problem which exceeds that of a merely empirical historiography. The break is a logical black hole: while it presupposes what it denies (the lineaments of a narrative periodization), it also denies what it presupposes, in that it itself eludes narrative or causal explanation. Foucault's epistemic breaks, for example, are famously uncaused; they simply happen—although Jameson works overtime to persuade us that Foucault's thought remains, in the end, 'profoundly dialectical'. But there is no intelligible historical narrative without a model of causality, however much the latter needs to be weaned from linear historicist constructions. In this respect, the epistemology of the break is held within the ideology of modernity itself, in its repeated association with the New, its casting as *pure* break—mythically attractive in spinning the various making-it-new scenarios of modernism but, as with all alleged events of spectacular self-origination, also begging the question of its own explanation.

For breaks are never just a snapping of the historical thread. They can be dramatic, or relatively prolonged, or both, as with the French Revolution, to the extent of constituting mini-periods in their own right; whose logic is governed by the principle of the transition which mediates between a continuist and discontinuist model of history. The transition designates the process—analysed by Jameson, again, via Heidegger and Foucault,

with the addition of Althusser and structuralist accounts of changes in the mode of production—whereby residual elements of previous systems of thought and practice are taken up within a new one, but with quite different functions. Transitions are thus zones of action characterized by overlaps, delays, *fuites en avant*, in which the various categories of pre, early, less, more and late ‘modern’ all participate. In particular, the notion of the transition carries major implications for how we think the connexions between modernity, modernization and modernism. The normal way of construing these links is to ‘posit modernity as the new historical situation, modernization as the process whereby we get there, and modernism as a reaction to that situation and that process alike’. But this may simply be defeated by the historical facts, especially when we take into account the highly varied national pathways both to and through the project of modernity, and the vastly differential and heterogeneous temporalities of modernization. Nor should modernity be identified with a ‘completed’ form (or as far as we have got with it) of industrial and technological modernization, which is, rather, a feature of postmodernity. Instead, modernity is tied to a situation of ‘incomplete’ modernization. It is a structure of hope, fear and fantasy invested in an emergent formation and a possible future.

Modernism’s entrance

This is also the case with the decisive moment of *modernism*, grasped as a set of aesthetic doctrines and artistic practices; that is to say, ‘classical’ or ‘high’ modernism—or what, trapped in the relativist straitjacket from which he is otherwise so desperate to escape, Jameson finds ‘embarrassing’ to call ‘real’ or ‘genuine’ modernism, and thus does so ‘not without some hesitation’. Classical modernism belongs in a ‘transitional era’ poised between ‘two distinct worlds’, those of the traditional, agricultural and peasant order, and the new machine-based industrialism, where the ‘new technological machinery brings with it its own aesthetic shock, in the way it erupts without warning into the older pastoral and feudal landscape’. Russia, Italy, and to some extent pre-First World War France provide the key examples. This is the social-historical context of the Shock of the New at its most authentically shocking, whether in a mode of euphoric exhilaration or of profound cultural despair. In this regard, Jameson’s narrative echoes Perry Anderson’s periodization of modernism as dating, roughly, from the late nineteenth century through to the eve of the Second World War; and issuing from a triangulated field

of force that comprises a society, whose 'ruling order remained to a significant extent agrarian or aristocratic'; a technology 'whose impact was still fresh or incipient'; and 'an open political horizon in which revolutionary upheavals of one kind or another against the prevailing order were widely expected or feared'. None of the three coordinates was 'at peace with the market as the organizing principle of a modern culture'.⁸

Anderson's periodizing construct is one robustly built to last, although it has recently been buffeted by T. J. Clark, whose *longue durée* perspective, commanded by a increasingly bleak neo-Weberian story of disenchantment, forms a powerful counter-narrative, marred only by its occasional air of a lament delivered from the slopes of Mount Sinai. It is not clear that Jameson has much that is distinctive to add to Anderson's account. He is also close to Anderson in reminding us that, if this is modernism as the 'genuine' article, it did not typically name itself as such but was characterized rather by a plurality of terms: constructivism, futurism, cubism, surrealism and so forth. The homogenizing label 'modernism' was a later application, retrospectively conferred, partly with a view to imposing a seamlessly linear temporality on an allegedly unified field.

This subsequent development brings us forward to the phase that Jameson terms 'late modernism', in which the congealing force of ideology finally takes hold. Late modernism is an essentially us affair⁹ and is 'a product of the Cold War, but in all kinds of complicated ways'. It is 'late' not just in the temporal sense, post-Second World War, but also as a belated reprise—at once modifying and traducing—of some of the canonical features of earlier modernist thinking. On one hand, it keeps faith with the anti-modernity strain of high modernism, a last ditch stand against the depredations of capital as a market society hovers over its descent into the trammels of a fully commercialized postmodernity. On the other, it is distinguished from the 'heroic' moment of its predecessor in its complicity with 'the end of a whole era of social transformations and indeed of Utopian desires and anticipations'. It embodies a retreat from political alternatives to the rule of capital, through its insistence on (a version of) the 'autonomy' of art. Its high priest was Clement

⁸ Perry Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity*, London 1998, p. 81

⁹ This might have been news to someone like the Danish painter Asger Jorn and the Cobra movement, but that involves another story altogether, engaging quite different meanings for both the terms 'modernism' and 'late': Clark, *Farewell to an Idea*, p. 389–91.

Greenberg, to whom Jameson accords some extended, if over-inflating, attention.¹⁰ Greenberg's relentless touting of the self-referring flatness and materiality of the painterly surface sought to sever art from representational practices, including the anguished engagement of an earlier modernism with the limits of representation—an aspect of modernism in, for example, cubist painting, that was systematically eclipsed in the texts and discourses surrounding the exhibitions at MoMA during Greenberg's long intellectual reign.¹¹

Subjectivity and crisis

We can think of this moment as a variant of 'ideological' modernism for several reasons, but most centrally by virtue of a line, deceptively continuous, running back to the beginnings—in so far as these are at all locatable—of the whole story. The philosophical *fons et origo* of modernity, in this narrative, is the cognitive sovereignty won by the Cartesian *cogito*—'the Samuel Smiles of cognitive enterprise', as Ernest Gellner put it.¹² Wrested from the shackles of medieval theology, this mid-seventeenth-century conquest inaugurated the long history of the subject-object split, the celebration of the virtues of privacy, individuality and introspection—and the corresponding negative mantras, from romanticism onwards, of loss, alienation and reification, the separation of spheres of social life (subsequently refined by Luhman in the notion

¹⁰ Greenberg was certainly a man of great intelligence and indomitable intellectual will; but a 'genius as a critic', as Jameson puts it, is arguably a misuse of terms.

¹¹ Quoting the catalogue entry on MoMA's cubist Picassos by the chief curator, William Rubin—which describes the paintings' representational constituents as 'largely abstracted from their former descriptive functions. Thus disengaged, they are reordered to the expressive purposes of the pictorial configurations as autonomous entities'—Clark comments biting on "pictorial configurations" having (in and of themselves, it seems to be claimed) "expressive purposes". While registering 'the shock and excitement' of a first encounter with his work, for Clark, 'even at the time, it was chilling to see Greenberg's views become an orthodoxy': *Farewell to an Idea*, pp. 175–6. As Compagnon notes, Greenberg's defence of the values of surface and flatness rests on a schematic historicist narrative, at once continuist and teleological, whereby Cézanne 'prepares' cubism, and cubism 'anticipates' abstract expressionism. The narrative entails a travesty of the facts, in the cases of Cézanne, Picasso and Braque literally editing out of the picture what, so to speak, flatly contradicts the hypothesis of flatness: *Les cinq paradoxes de la modernité*, pp. 65–78.

¹² Gellner, *Reason and Culture*, Oxford 1992, p. 3. Gellner of course sees self-made Cognitive Man as an immense cultural gain.

of 'differentiation'), the hyper-reflexivities of self-consciousness, and the autonomy of the aesthetic.

This is where Jameson's effort to look both at and through his pane of glass is at its most taxingly strenuous. The section on Descartes is one of the more opaque in the book, but is essentially geared to contesting the story of both modernity and modernism that places the primacy of the subject centre-stage. This yields the decisive formulation of his Third Maxim: 'The narrative of modernity cannot be organized around categories of subjectivity (consciousness and subjectivity are unrepresentable)'. Subjectivity, as the ground of thinking, cannot thereby be an object of representation for thought. Jameson suggestively rewrites Descartes's *ergo* as 'that is to say', rather than as 'therefore', thus releasing *cogito, ergo sum* from the representational form of a syllogism.

This does not mean that there is no relation between subjectivity and representation in modernist art and literature. On the contrary, much artistic energy went into the search for meaning among the ruins of the given meanings. There is, for example, what Jameson terms a form of post-romantic 'nominalism', in which a traditional and precisely coded lexicon for the naming of feelings and emotions ('the unsatisfactory inherited linguistic schema of subjectivity') breaks down, to be replaced with 'some newer representational substitute'. This is often—wrongly—described as the 'progressive uncovering of new realms of subjectivity'. It reflects rather 'a perpetual process of unnamings and refiguration which has no foreseeable stopping point (until, with the end of the modern itself, it reaches exhaustion)'. Modernist subjectivity has, therefore, nothing to do with the ideological cliché of the 'inward turn'. It is rather about a crisis of subjectivity and a related crisis of representation. It is not so much that the self is there to be 'explored' as that it is overwhelmed by 'an apocalyptic dissatisfaction with subjectivity itself'. The drive is to 'mutation' and 'transfiguration' of the system of subjectivity, linked to the telos of 'a Utopian and revolutionary transmutation of the world of actuality itself'. It is what came to be called 'depersonalization', the tones of which are first heard in the fiction of Flaubert and the poetry of Mallarmé and Rilke.

From purity to nothingness

The myths of subjectivity helped both to found and reinforce two other notions which, *mutatis mutandis*, take us forward to the ideological scene

of late modernism: reflexivity and autonomy. The idea of the autonomous and self-referring nature of the work of art was not, of course, a North American invention of the Cold War period; it arose more or less co-extensively with the elaboration of the discipline of aesthetics from the later eighteenth century onwards; its philosophical *locus classicus* being Kant's *Third Critique*. But it is here that the alleged line of continuity proves truly deceptive, and a prime instance of the way the 'same' element can acquire different 'functional' values in different systems of thought. Jameson is thus categorical that any claiming of the lineage of Kant for late-modernist ideology is itself a historical category-mistake. Kantian aesthetics 'freed art from feudal decoration and positioned a new bourgeois art to carry Utopian and, later, modernist values'. It is hence quite wrong 'to reappropriate the Kantian system for an anti-political and purely aestheticist late modernist revival'. These are both wise and heartening words, at a time when Kant is being disreputably pressed into the service of all kinds of non-Kantian commitments. For Kant and his successors—most notably, Schiller and Hegel—culture was a point of mediation between art and society. Late-modernist ideology was, and to some extent remains, precisely the rupture of that mediation. It operated a highly charged form of modern 'separation', between art and culture, the ultimate purpose of which was to introduce a scission into the very concept of the aesthetic itself, securing it for the realm of high art, the 'aesthetic field radically cleansed and purified of culture'—which comes, increasingly, to stand for 'mass culture'. Its avatars will be the notions of 'pure' painting and poetry, reflected, for instance, in Blanchot's view of literature as pure writing, autonomous and disinterested. No longer in the Kantian sense of the terms but rather as motiveless, absolute negativity: Blanchot's notorious '*le rien pur et simple*'.

Late-modernist ideology thus envisaged a practice of art from which 'content' (Greenberg's term) was to be excised. The relevant form of content was largely narrative in kind and excising it was one way of making history disappear. Narrative, however, has a way of springing back, reminiscent of the return of the repressed; a psychoanalytical notion much favoured by Jameson. In the sphere of literary theory, we witness its return in the advent of the various structuralist narratologies, along with the rediscovery of Bakhtin and certain interpretations of Freud. More pertinently, we also encounter it in many of the writers associated with the period of late modernism—Beckett, along with Nabokov, is cited as an exemplary instance. Ostensibly, late-modernist

writing exemplifies the new, self-enclosed and content-banishing style of reflexivity, in contradistinction to the more open and questioning sort of classical modernism; it ‘involves a constant and self-conscious return to art about art, and art about the creation of art’. Beckett’s minimalism, especially in the late texts, is posited as a formalism: textual and scenic repetition as a kind of abstract dance, aspiring to the visual conditions of painting and the rhythmic properties of music. But in the residual trace of narrative representation at its core—for Jameson, the ‘anecdote’—such work also gives the lie to late-modernist ideology:

an anecdotal core or given always marks the inassimilable empirical content which was to have been the pretext for sheer form . . . unhappy marriage, intolerable youthful memories, a banal family structure, with irreducible names and characters, the punctual biographical events that stand out unredeemably from the failure of a drab and sorry life.

This characterization of Beckett warrants some comment that might bear more generally on the thrust of Jameson’s literary and cultural thinking. For to see Beckett’s work as a refuge for late-modernist ideological formalism, then undercut by a minuscule and impoverished return of the narrative repressed, might well be the point at which some choose to check out of the argument. Beckett famously described his work as an art of ‘subtraction’, but subtraction of what from what remains an immensely controversial question, much larger in its potential remit than Jameson’s scheme allows for. There is also a strangely elliptical transition from the concluding remarks on Beckett to the claim that one of the consequences of late-modernist ideology was the ‘production of a far more accessible literature of what can then be called a middle-brow type’. The literature in question is neither specified nor attributed, and the ellipsis could be taken to imply that Beckett is placed in this company. If this is what Jameson means it borders on the fatuous and suggests that the insistence on the late modern as a period category has produced a wilful ‘subtraction’ of a very different kind.

But perhaps a different point is being made here, concerned less with Beckett than with ‘Beckett’, that is, the image forged in the public reception of his work, above all *Waiting for Godot*. Here indeed—along with the literally circulated image of Nabokov, on the cover of *Time* magazine—was a middlebrow version of a kind of pop-cultural event. This dissemination was, in many ways, the quintessence of

late-modernist ideology served up for public consumption and attracts the acerbic comment that:

It does not seem unduly restrictive, in an age of mass education, to suggest that the public of such a middlebrow late-modernist literature and culture can be identified as the class fraction of college students (and their academic trainers), whose bookshelves, after graduation into 'real life', preserve the souvenirs of this historically distinctive consumption which the surviving high modernist aesthetes and intellectuals have baptized as the canon, or Literature as such.

Excavating the future

This is where Jameson's story more or less leaves us. What, then, does it finally deliver? Basically, the assertion that modernity and the discourses about it—or perhaps: modernity *as* the discourses about it—are essentially ways of talking (or refusing to talk) about capitalism. The equation of modernity and capitalism is trenchant, though not unqualified:

if I recommend the experimental procedure of substituting capitalism for modernity in all the contexts in which the latter appears, this is a therapeutic rather than a dogmatic recommendation, designed to exclude old problems (and to produce new and more interesting ones).

This is also true of the principal discourses of modernism, whatever the particular stance adopted by any given doctrine, manifesto or artwork. If, in order to understand our own history, they are 'unavoidable', they are also, now, 'unacceptable'. There is an imperative need to clear the decks, all the more so given the extent to which the discursive space has been re-colonized by a brazenly opportunist politics. To be 'modern' today is simply to be smart, in all senses—including, of course, the ability to follow where the smart money goes. The best, then, might be just to forget it, were it not that 'forgetting' is itself a modernist trope, and why an 'ontology of the present', Jameson's immensely appealing subtitle, has to deal with *both* the unacceptable and the unavoidable. On the other hand, Jameson's exit is splendidly abrasive: 'What we really need is a wholesale displacement of the thematics of modernity by the desire called Utopia', a gesture presumably meant as at once restorative—reclaiming what has been lost from the earlier phases of modernism—and oriented towards an as yet undefined future. Whence

the book's somewhat teasing final sentence: 'Ontologies of the present demand archaeologies of the future, not forecasts of the past.'

But if this is where the story ends, where does it leave us with the category of Story itself? I have already mentioned the dilemma of relativism that shadows Jameson's narratology, countered by the drive to move beyond trope and ideology in the direction of, precisely, an ontology as distinct from a discourse. The banner under which this endeavour flies is, of course, the Dialectic. The latter is what enables us to grasp how things hang together, without which we are permanently at risk of falling into those modernist traps—separation, specialization, autonomy—which are, at once, ideological constructs and real social-cultural effects:

the dialectic comes into being as an attempt to hold these contradictory features of structural analogy and the radical internal differences in dynamic and in historical causality together within the framework of a single thought or language.

But the dialectic does not come cheap. It is not a pre-given totalizing frame, effectively rigging the results in advance. It is a master-figure without the privilege of mastery, and appears as something of a modernist character in its own right, flitting in and out of the folds of Jameson's text, akin to Mallarmé's Absolute, floating in a zone of virtuality that is neither presence nor absence. The dialectic presupposes the general and the universal as a way of making sense of particulars; but access to the general and the universal can be had only by a passage through particulars. It is less a state than a process of thought.

This is eloquently said; but in this book, at least, the process in question is more gestured at, as a heuristically necessary presupposition, than actually instantiated. We perhaps get some sense of what the dialectic looks like in Jameson's handling of his theoretical sources. Much of the book takes the form of a suite of theoretical vignettes, deep-structural snapshots (rounding up the usual suspects: Heidegger, Adorno, Benjamin, Foucault, Barthes, Althusser, Derrida, Deleuze, Lyotard, de Man, Blanchot, Luhman, and—if I may ingenuously say—so on), all shaken in a cocktail of some higher-order synthesis. The procession of distilled theoretical profiles has long been a quintessential Jamesonian signature, but it might be just as plausible to see the method rather as an academic variant of a distinctively modernist idiom—

namely, the collage—than as an instance of the dialectic at work. In any case, this is a way of doing meta-theory on theories, as distinct from work on real historical processes and actual artistic practices. One striking feature of this volume—in part, about modernism—is that there are very many theories in it, but correspondingly little on artistic and literary practices. I imagine this is due in large measure to the slightly cryptic description of the book, on the inside cover, as ‘the theoretical section of the antepenultimate volume of *The Poetics of Social Forms*’. There is an exciting (utopian) promise here; although we might also want to bear in mind what Jameson himself says, in connexion with the holistic way with ‘periodization’:

this operation is intolerable and unacceptable in its very nature, for it attempts to take a point of view on individual events which is well beyond the observational capacities of any individual, and to unify, both horizontally and vertically, hosts of realities whose interrelationships must remain inaccessible and unverifiable, to say the least.

Saying the least here is saying a lot. It will be interesting to find out what, in these terms, the dialectic in action will give us.