



MARXIAN CONCEPTS OF POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE HERMENEUTICS

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Abstract:

The aim of the paper is to draw attention to the question of ultimate meanings in literary studies and its utilization for the sake of betterment of society. It starts with a view on how societies interpret their cultural products through Marxism, but not only pure Marxism but its combination with psychoanalysis, especially that of Lacan. Then, the paper delves into the question of subjectivity, or more precisely, the question of “*subject*.” Subject as a source of knowledge is reshaped in our digital era, and that is part of this second investigation. The third step is artistic rendering of a deeply political topic—historicity. “*Positive hermeneutics*” is viewed as approaching utopia in the chosen work of art. However, in our conclusion, the positive hermeneutic traits of historical perspectives do not necessarily provide good political solutions. On the other side, “*negative hermeneutics*” has been integrated into our academic spaces for a long time, but the paper does not delve into that path as a separate issue. The whole idea is to present how successful the combination of intellectual activity, political space and artistic or utopian endeavor can be. None of these items should be viewed as separate, and that is also the point of the paper.

Keywords: Fredric Jameson, historicism, utopia, Alasdair Gray, psychoanalysis

1. Introduction

Our initial position is that there is no “*objective*” way of interpreting a literary text. All kinds of interpretation are driven by ideology. The purpose of ideology is to construct or to lead society into a particular direction. Human beings as political beings primarily operate as a group, whether it be a clan or an organized state that is driven by a symbolic order or ideology of some kind. In other words, being political is being ethical. This kind of materialist ethical position may be said to be close to a Marxist position when it comes to culture. We may even further ascertain that the main purpose of any organized human

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society is to either openly or subconsciously admit that they are driven by a certain ideology.

Fredric Jameson opens his book *The Political Unconscious* (1983) with the following unequivocal statement:

"This book will argue the priority of the political interpretation of literary texts. It conceives of the political perspective not as some supplementary method, not as an optional auxiliary to other interpretive methods [...] but rather as the absolute horizon of all reading and all interpretation." (p. 1)

In order to move towards the predominantly collective symbolic space, literature is no longer taken as separate items created by equally separate and unique authors—this does not mean that such a view is never to be taken—but as containing what Fredric Jameson calls "*ideologeme*" as its basic unit. It functions as "*the smallest intelligible unit of the essentially antagonistic collective discourses of social classes*" (Jameson, 1983, p. 61). It is akin to stylistic features such as metaphors, allusions and symbols. Ideologemes are universal and are distributed everywhere regardless of the specificity of time in which texts that contain them are produced.

Another important aspect is that of a historical perspective. It is also a very much misunderstood item. The popular, and rather vulgar statement of "*history as being re-written by the victorious side*" implies that all historical perspectives are false and biased. This leads back to our initial position: the impossibility of an "*objective*" stance. However, maybe the problem lies in our perception of "*objectivity*." Are we, as humans, ever ideally objective, and if not so, whence comes this perceived ethical superiority of objectivity? These are the questions we will bear on our mind when delving into our topic.

The importance of a clear ideological vision cannot be stressed enough. On the other hand, when dealing with literary texts, we often end up in a kind of *cul-de-sac*. These are identified as purely linguistically important features. Pure formalism has its advantages, but it cannot teach us anything about the essence of human interactions. We cannot know anything "*by an aimless enumeration of random formal and stylistic features*" (Jameson, 1983, p. 63). What this kind of approach aims at is locating and defining these "*ideologemes*" within the symbolic space in a piece of literature.

2. The importance of psychoanalysis

In Fredric Jameson's tackling of the problems of art, history, politics, economics and human desire (the central part), we have got a basis for our own effort of tackling a specific work of art, with its specific historical place, culture and artistic vision. Historical perspective is of a crucial importance in our investigation. Interestingly, when discussing Balzac, Jameson stresses that the key feature appears to be a psychoanalytical term—desire. Since Balzac can be said to be a chronicler of French historical periods, the pure essence of wish-fulfillment within his very historical novels must remain unlimited either by time or place: "*From the point of view of interpretation [...] desire is always outside of time,*

outside of narrative: it has no content" (Jameson, 1983, p. 53). How is it possible to have the father of realism viewed by a Marxist philosopher as the one who is capable of diving into the very center of human innermost drives? The answer is in a psychoanalytic angle, despite the fact that both the key work for this paper—*The Political Unconscious*—and the chosen novel do not deal with psychoanalysis as such, but with historical/materialist interpretation of social ills. We may add Žižek's final conclusion about the necessity of psychoanalysis: "*Does Marxism still works? Yes—complemented with psychoanalysis*" (*Christian Atheism*, 2024, p. 223).

3. Negative and positive hermeneutics

Aestheticism is a powerful tool for constructing these symbolic spaces in which culture and literature act as guiding principles. However, it is very rarely that any kind of aestheticism in normal parlance is linked to a political meaning. In other words, political entities—such as social or professional classes as well as "people"—cannot function at all if not represented by a matching appearance: "*the aesthetic act is itself ideological, and the production of aesthetic or narrative form is to be seen as an ideological act in its own right*" (Jameson, 1983, p. 64). Also, any society from a Marxian point of view, is riddled with antagonisms. As a matter of fact, there has never been a space in which society functioned as "*an organic whole*." Hence, literature with historical contexts—such as that by Balzac—can be shown as trying to bridge these social chasms. But such a task is almost pointless, and the "*negative hermeneutics*" comes onto stage, especially in its postmodern apparel—deconstruction. Instead of providing a solution to a political problem via art, it further problematizes an already existing problem, i.e., "*unresolvable social contradictions*" (Jameson, 1983, p. 64).

Why "*social contradictions*" are not to be solved is explained by Slavoj Žižek in one of subchapters of his already quoted book, *Christian Atheism*, under the title "*Antagonisms Without Enemy*." The aim of any human society should obviously be a peaceful and cooperative existence. However, given the reality of human nature and its immanent contradictions, which are an essential part of our human psyche, societies naturally inherit these contradictions and antagonisms as part of themselves. Therefore, it follows that a harmonious society is an impossibility. That is not true. Forced harmonies should be discarded as they only mask the unrest within, but a more dynamic and changing society that aims at a real social harmony should emerge instead: "*an authentic emancipatory thought is not a vision of conflict-free harmonious future but the properly dialectical notion of antagonism which is totally incompatible with the Rightist topic of the need of an enemy to assert our self-identity*" (Žižek, 2024, pp. 206–207). What the author is warning us of here is that any kind of false social harmonies that rely on a perceived "*outside*" or inside enemy as a threat to that society mask the real internal issues that that society necessarily possesses.

4. The problem of subject

This has for a long time been the topic of psychoanalytical analysis. In our current age of digital spaces and AI, defining “*subject*”—as an autonomous agent—has become additionally problematized. A famous Lacanian, Alenka Zupančič (together with Mladen Dolar and Slavoj Žižek) tackles this problem through an anecdote of her own. Asking the currently most popular software AI, ChatGPT, about a Freudian dream analysis, she got a very generic and a completely wrong answer. The software responded with some well established visual and symbolic interpretations. However, when she corrected the machine by observing that Freud had never insisted on any symbolic interpretation of his clients' dreams but had rather let them interpret them by themselves, the program corrected itself and offered yet another generic and again, wrong answer. What happens here is something obvious: instead of providing answers to humans, the machine is using humans to “*learn*” or teach itself. Our question would be: who is actually “*learning*,” that is, what kind of subject—what kind of autonomous entity is behind the digital software: “*what ChatGPT lacks in order to become a subject, in a fully Lacanian sense, is not some, obviously, unfathomable, spontaneous depth of subjectivity; what it lacks is the presence, the impact of an Other*” (Zupančič, 2025, 24:48).

What is important to stress here is that a digital subject cannot be a proper subject because it lacks political subjectivity. It tries to mimic an objective stance. But authentic human subjectivity is never “*objective*” in this way. Its “*autonomy*” is not some essential, undisputable wholeness behind the human mask—that the digital entity tries to mimic—but a Lacanian view of subjectivity as a non-essential reality. It is basically the product of an interaction. “*Other*” and the “*BigOther*” are symbolic, but very real, spaces that are superimposed onto our collective consciousness. ChatGPT lacks subjectivity because it has never been properly engaged with the social Big Other. It appears as an already superior level of knowledge, something that we, mere humans, refer to for help. However, the real danger are the humans behind these programs:

“A new social order that is emerging out of the ruins of global capitalism, the order called “technofeudalism” or “cloud-capitalism,” subordinates “real” capitalists and the workers they exploit controlled by our new feudal masters [...] Market exchange is more and more mediated by digital platforms [...] and capitalists (book publishers, in this case) are vassals who pay feudal masters a rent to sell their products [...] We, buyers, are serfs who work freely for the clouds [...] Digital clouds run by self-learning and self-improving algorithms are thus the latest “divine” entity which largely escapes the control of its creators: even of the programmers who composed them.” (Žižek, 2024, pp. 201–202)

This is exactly what Alenka Zupančič experienced: instead of learning from the machine, she fed the machine new knowledge. Thus, she cannot be said to have experienced an interaction with another subject. Simply put, this “*interaction*” was just another exploitative extraction of valuables by new, digitally disguised, capital masters.

The problem of a knowing subject, which we accept in the form a computer algorithm driven by AI, is that this knowledge must be “problematic.” AI programs aim at what they perceive excellency and full functionality. However, the paradox is that we can only interact with an AI program only if it presents itself as a subject. But it is false subjectivity producing knowledge devoid of the unconscious aspect. Knowledge proper has a “*potentially traumatic dimension. This is what lies at the heart of Lacan’s insistence that the Freudian unconscious is not some romantic dimension of subjectivity [...] but that it is precisely about knowledge. The unconscious is a form of knowledge*” (Zupančič, 2024, p. 50). In other words, AI programs have neither wish nor time for trying to emulate human problematic unconscious. Otherwise, AI programs would need a psychoanalysis of their own.

5. The problem of historicity

Another equally problematic—equally as that of subject—item is historicity, not necessarily history as such, but the way we historicize our past. The problem has been dealt with in depth and it is a well-studied field in its own right. Needless to say, different political ideologies dictated the way philosophers and cultural critics dealt with the “problem” of historicity. Any interpretation inevitably ties itself to a historical perspective, whether general or specific. The predominant idealized (in a negative sense) view of history is what Fredric Jameson names “*American pluralism*,” a seemingly objective and unbiased view of our political past. It is far from being “objective” in the ordinary sense of the word: “*contemporary American ‘pluralism,’ with its unexamined valorization of the open (‘freedom’) versus its inevitable binary opposition of the closed (‘totalitarianism’)*” (1983, p. 16). Here Jameson’s “bias” is the most obvious. Jameson dismisses any value of binary oppositions; they spring up as a form of disguise that helps mask real issues. Hence, neither “freedom” nor “totalitarianism” are actually what they purportedly claim to be. Similarly, the perceived “honest” struggle between these two false entities does not exist either.

On the other hand, it is interesting to observe how the historical contextualization can be interpreted differently:

“If, as Jameson observes frequently in this book [The Political Unconscious], all interpretation is allegorical, we can locate the historical (which we must do in order to perceive the ideological as ideological) only by referring the text to some interpretive code already in place for us, some view of history [...] To accomplish what he wants to accomplish, Jameson must insist that the Marxist narrative of history is not a narrative, not a text, but he is too deeply implicated in hermetic thought to assert this.” (Scholes, 1985, p. 81)

Scholes here accuses Jameson of having a particular historical bias—that of Marxism—that prevents him from seeing freely the “objective” truth. As a retroactive response, Jameson, as it were predicted a remark like Scholes’ one, by stating:

"[W]hen the critics of Marxist interpretation [...] suggest that the Marxian interpretative operation involves a thematization and a reification of "History" which is not markedly different from the process the other interpretive codes produce their own forms of thematic closure and offer themselves as absolute methods." (1983, p. 86)

Knowing one's history plays a crucial part in proper knowledge in general. Historical perspective is viewed as something opposite to an everlasting imagined space of absolute knowing. In this way, "truth" has also become a problematic term. Is truth absolute, immutable and whole? In reality we have to "historicize" it, paradoxically to put it in relativizing historical contexts in order to gain access to its universality. Here we come again to what Fredric Jameson calls "the falsity of binary oppositions," in this case between an "objective" and thus a superior stance and, on the other hand, a less valued, highly biased, "subjective" view. In order to make things clearer, psychoanalytical approach may be helpful:

"[I]n contrast to knowledge which relies on an impartial "objective" stance of its bearer, truth is never neutral, it is by definition militant, subjectively engaged. [...] When I fight for emancipation, the Truth I am fighting for is absolute, although it is obviously the Truth of a specific historical situation." (Žižek, 2024, p. 10)

This is why we will deal with a symbolic space in art that is culturally specific and historically limited.

6. Gray's historicity in *A History Maker*

Alasdair Gray (1934–2019) was a Scottish writer and painter born in Glasgow. He published his seventh novel *A History Maker* in 1994. All of Gray's novels are set in Scotland, with this novel set in a futuristic, dystopian Scottish rural community whose main feature are the so-called "wargames": a reenactment of the bygone clan wars of old Scotland immortalized in heavily romanticized novels by Walter Scott. The young men of the society engage in these war games as a way to earn honour. The two main clans have proper Scottish names: Ettrick and Northumbrian. A general of the losing clan gives an almost traditional speech, a kind of romanticizing invocation of bygone heroic ages:

"That flag flew over us in the bonny days when we were many and strong. Will we abandon it now just because we are few and weak? Have we become so sensible—so comfortable—so unmanly that we can bask like lions in the sunlight of victory but flee like hens from the shadow of certain death? A heroic defeat makes brave men as glorious as a victory I think!" (p. 9)

Despite the fact that in reality there is no need to go into wars anymore as the society has sorted out all of its economical and social problems by creating this almost perfect patriarchal society in which everybody knows their place and are supposedly

satisfied to the utmost. War games are broadcasted to the public via medium that is named "*Public Eye*," a sort of predecessor of today's highly popular podcasts and Tik Tok short videos. Despite the wars being "*games*," that is not having any practical purpose or financial gain, the results are real: death and mutilation:

"How will the battle go today, General Dodds? says the public eye to the middle commander. Dodds looks at the air over it and speaks as if to himself. "We'll crush them. They've no food, no water, we outnumber them ten to one. We'll have their standard thirty minutes after starting bell." "You have lost a lot to Ettrick," says the eye, spinning round Dodd's head to show the wrinkled flesh and small holes where his nose and ears had been." (p. 4)

These battles are a form of ultimate enjoyment, precisely as they bring no material gain (apart from symbolic possession of a piece of land). However, not even the physical brutality of a virtual war is not satisfying in the end. It feels empty. This is why the hero of the novel, Watt Dryhope, a young dissatisfied man, is slowly plotting the fall of this Scottish, rural, utopian empire. Watt's imagination invokes former, happier but also more terrible times, in an odd fit of nostalgia:

"The historical epoch, the killing time when huge governments had split the world into nations warring for each other's property. He recalled with pride that for centuries the border clans had held aloof from England and Scotland, siding with whichever nation was too weak to tax them. But theft and murder had flourished in these rough hills too. The old ballads were full of it [...] He smiled and heard wind stir the grass, near and distant cries of the whaups." (pp. 60–61)

Scottish landscape, especially its wildness and uncouthness is always present whenever the hero muses about the chaos of history. However, the unrest and dissatisfaction are brewing beneath and the young hero is the history maker from the title. How he does this is by destroying the seemingly perfect social structure, a society that was just and caring enough about its members to the point of allowing unnecessary war games in order to allow excessive enjoyment by its men's "*manliness*." Women do not participate in these war games. Their role has regressed into an old role of housemakers and nurses. Intellectual activity is, interestingly, deemed dangerous for the tranquility of the society, as it can provoke its citizens into thinking and questioning, which in turn can lead to social unrest.

Why is any vision of human society in art fraught with political importance? It is precisely what the most fundamental of insights into postmodern literature—Brian McHale's *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987)—also stresses. The main question here is the question of reality. Whether art mirrors reality is at the bottom of all these enquiries. McHale gives us a caricature-like picture of the power of art. It is a "*demiurgic or quasi-divine*" (1987, p. 29), or, in other words, it can never duplicate our reality. However, Fredric Jameson insists on the power of aestheticism to shape our reality and most

importantly, its political aspect. The difference between modernism and postmodernism revolves around the question of subject, which is dealt with briefly in this paper. Jameson notices how in postmodernism *"the concepts such as anxiety and alienation (and the experiences to which they correspond, as in The Screamⁱⁱ) are no longer appropriate"* (*"The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,"* 2002, p. 25). Philosophy—including Marxism—may be taken as a bridge between art and *"reality,"* especially our political reality: *"The philosophical consideration of the work of art as an object that encloses, by its ontological attributes, a sedimentation of immaterial content in the material-form"* (Bottero, 2022, p. 324). *"Immaterial content in the material-form"* is reminiscent of Fredric Jameson's concept of ideologeme. Pure ideas in tangible forms.

If we regard Alasdair Gray's *A History Maker* as a work of art that contains a specific, culturally speaking, ideologeme within its lower sediments, it is a view of Scottish history against the background of repression, political instability and uncertain identity: *"The nation-as-unity is the reflex of the idea of the nation as founded on linguistic purity and homogeneity"* (Craig, 1999, p. 30). Hence, Gray's sense of unease when asked whether he views himself as a postmodernist writer. Postmodernism or deconstruction (Jameson's *"negativehermeneutics"*) rejects the notion of homogeneity. Still, Gray defined himself as a national writer and that is why all of his novels deal with Scotland and have a Scottish person as their hero. Affirming one's clear national position would fall within Jameson's *"positivehermeneutics."* On the other hand, Gray's ideological difficulties can be summed in:

"[H]ow is a 'national' voice to be expressed, if we reject the homogenous model of any national identity? [...] in order to uncover the hidden Scottish cultural identity, we need to reach out to the latest, postmodern, models: hence we introduce Fredric Jameson." (Jović, 2021, p. 360)

What appears as a contradiction—postmodernism as opposed to a clearly defined national identity—is resolved through Marxism.

The dystopian future in *A History Maker* is transcended by an act of social rebellion—the introduction of *"history,"* i.e., change, transformation and upheaval—and the society goes back to its normal dysfunctionality filled with unresolvable social antagonisms.

"History is what hurts, it is what refuses desire and sets inexorable limits to individual as well as collective praxis, which its 'ruses' turn into grisly and ironic reversals of their over intention. But this History can be apprehended only through its effects, and never directly as some reified force [...] History as ground and untranscendable horizon needs no particular theoretical justification: we may be sure that its alienating necessities will not forget us." (Jameson, 1983, pp. 87–88)

ⁱⁱ By Edward Munch.

Let us not forget the opening of T. S. Eliot's masterpiece *The Waste Land* with "April is the cruellest month, breeding / Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing / Memory and desire, stirring / Dull roots with spring rain." In other words, what drives history are human desires, and this view is espoused by a stance that relies on historical materialism as its basis.

7. Discussion

The most infamous binary opposition is that between "idealism" and "materialism." However, if we maintain our adopted Jameson's position of regarding binary oppositions as essentially false, then it follows that the perceived idealism is, actually, not idealism and the perceived materialism is also not materialism in the true sense. Traditionally, Marxism has been viewed as opposed to any kind of more "abstract" forms of political or religious ideologies. However, its reality is "not a mechanical but a historical materialism" (Jameson, 1983, p. 30) and it does posit society as fundamentally social or interactive, despite the appearance of tautology here. Elsewhere, Jameson critiques the process of extraction or individualization across various phenomena that is driven by capitalist logic.

"Historical materialism" in itself unites both materialism and idealism. Any text or view on history is by nature ideal, or rather philosophical. Ideas are not hard objects, though they can sometimes be more threatening than any hard object. In other words, Marxism basically approaches history purely critically. As a tool, it is infinitely valuable.

Another false opposition is that between individualism and collective, or the perceived moral superiority of individualism as opposed to collectivism: "the need to transcend individualistic categories and modes of interpretation is in many ways the fundamental issue for any doctrine of the political unconscious, of interpretation in terms of the collective or associative" (Jameson, 1983, p. 53). What is at stake here is not an outright dismissal of individualism. It is about how we as individuals shape our individuality with the help of some either political, philosophical or religious ideology. Such ideologies in themselves are not interested in individuals as such, but in the collective. Hence, our perceived individualism by itself comes very much to becoming meaningless. The historical perspective becomes very important here as regarding the questions of individualism and the collective:

"For Marxism [...] it is the radical break between the two social formations which must be stressed, if we are to begin to grasp the degree to which capitalism has effectively dissolved all the older forms of collective relations, leaving their cultural expressions and their myths as incomprehensible to us as so many dead languages or undecipherable codices." (p. 54)

Going back to history in *A History Maker* in order to make a final point: it can never be stressed enough that modern, industrialized worlds cannot pretend to authentically relive old, mostly feudal or pastoral cultures from our past. In Alasdair Gray's novel such an unsuccessful effort takes place. In a futuristic dystopian Scotland, people relive old times of clan wars, similarly to the way Walter Scott described the Highlands and Scottish

romanticized past. Any kind of such retrieval turns out to be false. Fredric Jameson, on the other hand, does warn about the necessity of keeping political reality on mind all the time, but he also stresses the importance of utopian impulse in human consciousness that drives collective groups progressively. As a conclusion, we may infer that the Marxian concepts of negative and positive hermeneutics, especially in literary works, do not stand opposed but point at two ways political consciousness can reshape our reality, uniting both metaphysical aspect—utopian or “*positive hermeneutical*”—and more materialistic critical stance—that of “*a negative hermeneutics*” or deconstruction.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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