Jameson, Conrad, and the Dialectic of Utopia and Ideology

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In his Preface to *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’*, Joseph Conrad writes, “My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word, to make you feel, to make you hear — it is, before all, to make you see” (143). This powerful declaration of Conrad’s literary impressionism still serves as the clearest embodiment of his artistic credo, a declaration which remains one of late Victorian and early modernist literature’s most important artistic statements. Although he is not, of course, announcing his own version of literary impressionism, Louis Althusser probably has Conrad’s words in mind when he explains that “the peculiarity of art is to ‘make us see’ (nous donner à voir), ‘make us perceive’, ‘make us feel’ something which *alludes* to reality” (204). For Althusser, “what art makes us see, and therefore gives to us in the form of ‘seeing’, ‘perceiving’, and ‘feeling’ (which is not the form of *knowing*), is the *ideology* from which it is born, in which it bathes, from which it detaches itself as art, and to which it *alludes*” (204). For Conrad it is the impression itself that is “everything,” although he adds that somehow one may also find “that glimpse of truth for which you have forgotten to ask” (Preface 143). It is intriguing to conceive of Althusser’s “perceiving” of “ideology” as a cleverly reinterpreted Conradian “glimpse of truth,” though the projects of these two men seem worlds apart. Interestingly, whether by pure coincidence or by some inexorable connection, Conrad’s *Heart of*
Darkness in fact serves as an extremely productive text from which to explore the strengths and weaknesses of the contemporary Marxist critique of ideology.

Although traditional Marxism certainly has had its own disagreements,2 since the work of Althusser contemporary Marxism has found itself increasingly confronted by two seemingly divergent trends: traditional (scientific, classical) Marxism with its emphasis on dialectical materialism and on ideology as false consciousness, and critical (post-Althusserian) Marxism with its post-structuralist aversion to "totalizing closures" (Ryan xv) and Althusser’s reconception of ideology as "a representation of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence."

In The Political Unconscious, Fredric Jameson attempts a critical articulation of these two tendencies. Briefly, Jameson’s project is to "restructure the problematics of ideology... around the all-informing process of narrative" (13).3 He employs ideology "in Althusser’s sense as a representational structure which allows the individual subject to conceive his or her lived relationship to transpersonal realities such as the social structure or the collective logic of History" (30). He likewise accepts ‘the Althusserian dictum, ‘History is a process without a telos or a subject’... as a repudiation of... master narratives and their twin categories of narrative closure (telos) and of character (subject of history)” (29).

At the same time, Jameson himself admits that his fundamental premise, that Marxism is the “untranscendable horizon” that “sumes” all other interpretations, hearkens back to the “more authentic dialectical tradition” of classical Marxism (10). Jameson grounds this premise upon the assumption that “history is not a text, not a narrative, master or otherwise” (35). Significantly, however, Jameson qualifies this assertion in an attempt to effect a reconciliation with post-Althusserian Marxism: History is thus posited as “an absent cause... inaccessible to us except in textual form” (35). This “genuine philosophy of history” (18) leads Jameson to postulate “the unity of a single great collective story,” which is “the collective struggle to wrest a realm of Freedom from a realm of Necessity” (19).

In order to apply his ideas to literature, Jameson proposes analyzing texts from three "concentric frameworks" (75). Jameson’s final framework, that of “the ideology of form” (76), corresponds with modernism, and for this analysis he chooses as his texts Conrad’s Lord Jim and Nostromo. In this essay I will explore how a parallel sort of Jamesonian reading of Heart of Darkness offers an insightful and productive glimpse into the ideology of the Conradian text. Yet I also will explore how such a reading reveals The Political Unconscious, itself to be merely another ideological text, one with its own master narrative and attendant imaginary narrative closure.

The Jamesonian approach to Conrad “posits ideology in terms of strategies of containment, whether intellectual or (in the case of narra-
tives) formal” (52-53). This premise implies that the formal aspects of a

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text are in fact “sedimented content in their own right, as carrying ide­

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ological messages of their own” (Jameson 99) — hence the term “the ide­

ology of form.” Jameson begins his discussion by analyzing the strategies of

containment created by the combination of the high and mass culture

modes in the novels, concluding from these strategies that while “Lord

Jim remains stubbornly deflected onto the problematic of the individual

act,” Nostromo becomes a “meditation on History” (264). It is in order to

explore the fullest ramifications of both of these positions in relation to

the ideology of form that Jameson turns to A. J. Greimas’s use of the semi­

otic rectangle. This semiotic rectangle at first seems irreconcilable with

a Marxist critique because it is “organized around binary oppositions

rather than dialectical ones” and because it structures the relationships

it creates “in terms of homology” (47). Yet for Jameson this choice is an

appropriate one for a project structured “around the all-informing

process of narrative” in that Greimas’s work (as Jameson characterizes it

in Marxism and Form) involves “analyzing all kinds of verbal materials .

. . in terms of a storytelling model” (Marxism 205).

Jameson, then, “reappropriates” Greimas’s system “by designating it

as the very locus and model of ideological closure” (47). That is, the

semiotic rectangle “furnishes the graphic embodiment of ideological

closure as such, and allows us to map out the inner limits of a given ide­

ological formation and to construct the basic terms of this particular

libidinal apparatus . . . “ (48). Such a construction, for Jameson, pro­

vides a glimpse of “the informing power of forces or contradiction

which the text seeks in vain wholly to control or master,” a glimpse

“into the very political unconscious” (49).

If we begin to apply Jameson’s approach to Heart of Darkness, we are

immediately confronted by the question of whether the text should be

read as centering upon “the problematic of the individual act” (as Jame­

son reads Lord Jim) or upon “a meditation on History” (as he reads Nos­

stromo). Clearly it is possible to see it either way. The former would

claim either Kurtz’s or Marlow’s glimpse “over the edge” as the focal

point of the text (or, one may even claim both characters, each in his

own individual way, serve as separate focal points). The latter would

argue that it is the collective action revolving around the Belgian expe­
dition that is significant as separate individual acts merge into the ideal

synthesis of a collective actant. Although the former approach also

yields interesting insights, I will be using the latter here because it bet­
ter exposes the ideology of form in Heart of Darkness and reveals the desire

for ideological closure within the Jamesonian critique itself.

Jameson’s Greimassian schematic for Nostromo actually works quite

nicely for Heart of Darkness as well, and it offers a persuasive reading of

the text’s mechanism for narrative closure. The semiotic rectangle is

formed by mapping two interrelated sets of contradictory pairs, which

Jameson explains in a footnote to his chapter on Realism and Desire. It

is worth quoting the sentence comprising this explanation in full:
Briefly, the semiotic rectangle or "elementary structure of signification" is the representation of a binary opposition or of two contraries (S and -S), along with the simple negations or contradictions of both terms (the so-called subcontraries -S and $S$): significant slots are constituted by the various possible combinations of these terms, most notably the "complex" term (or ideal synthesis of the two contraries) and the "neutral" term (or ideal synthesis of the two subcontraries).

Graphically deployed, the primary pair of contraries form the upper corners of the rectangle (with $S$ in the upper left and $-S$ in the upper right) and their simple negations form the bottom corners (facing them diagonally, with $-S$ in the lower left and $S$ in the lower right). Jameson's explanation of this semiotic rectangle in his chapter on Louis Marin in Volume 2 of *The Ideologies of Theory* is helpful in understanding how the rectangle works, as well as suggestive of its relationship to Jameson's utopianism. Here Jameson explains that, while Claude Lévi-Strauss understands mediation in his work on myth "essentially as an operation bearing on the two 'primary' terms of the fundamental contradiction or binary opposition itself" (S and $-S$), Greimas argues that "this by no means exhausts the logical possibilities and permutational combinations inherent in the simplest binary opposition" ("Of Islands" 78). In fact, "not only do the logical contradictorius [sic] of S and $-S$ furnish two more independent terms, but the various axes thus generated (negative and positive deixis, implication, contradictions) suggest that [Greimas's rectangle] is capable of generating a number of quite distinct 'mediatory' combinations alongside the one operative in Lévi-Strauss'[s] mythic resolutions, designated in Greimas'[s] system as the complex term C" ("Of Islands" 78).

In detailing how Greimas's rectangle clarifies for us the difference between myth in Lévi-Strauss and the Utopian in Marin, Jameson further supplements our understanding of the workings of this logical schema. According to Jameson, the Utopian narrative is for Marin "the structural inversion of myth":

[whereas] the narrative operation of myth undertakes to mediate between the two primary terms of the opposition $S$ and $-S$, and to produce a complex term that would be their resolution, Utopian narrative is constituted by the union of the twin contradicators of the initial opposition, the combination of $-S$ and $S$, a combination which, virtually a double cancellation of the initial contradiction itself, may be said to effect the latter's *neutralization* and to produce a new term, the so-called neuter or neutral term $N$.

("Of Islands" 79)
Returning to Jameson’s use of this schema in reading *Nostromo*, then, Jameson posits the text’s primary pair of contraries as that of the Ideal versus the Self, which in turn generates the simple negations of Cynicism and Selflessness. Graphically displayed, Ideal and Self are the upper left and upper right corners respectively, and Selflessness and Cynicism are the lower left and lower right corners respectively. In plotting *Nostromo* and its characters, Jameson sees the Ideal as represented by Decoud (also parenthetically associated with Charles Gould and capitalism) and the Self as represented by Nostromo (also parenthetically associated with Viola and nationalism/populism). The complex term represented by the union of these two characters is literalized in the text by the Decoud-Nostromo expedition, The Act. Their simple negations, combining to form the neutral term of The Witness, are represented by the Women (Selflessness) and Dr. Monygham (Cynicism). The vertical sides offer their own semic combinations as well: the left side of Ideal and Selflessness invokes (through Decoud and Antonia) Marriage, the Victorian hearth, and (parenthetically) extinction; the right side of Self and Cynicism invokes (through Nostromo and Dr. Monygham) History, Latin America, and (parenthetically) castration.

We may use the very same terms of the *Nostromo* rectangle in constructing a rectangle for *Heart of Darkness* (that is, the rectangle would be similarly constructed around the binary oppositions of self/selflessness and idealism/cynicism, and would also incorporate the notion of a collective actant into the scheme in the form of The Act and The Witness). Accordingly, in *Heart of Darkness* I associate Kurtz with the Ideal and the Pilgrims — his partners in The Act (the Belgian “mission” in the Congo) — with the Self. The Witness to the Act, testifying to its accomplishment(s) in front of the jury of readers in the courtroom of the text, is formed by the collaboration of Kurtz’s Intended (as Selflessness) and Marlow (as Cynicism). Finally, then, the left side’s semic combination of Kurtz and his Intended invokes Marriage, The Sepulchral City, and extinction; while the right side’s semic combination of the Pilgrims and Marlow invokes History, the Congo, and castration.

Marlow (as Cynicism) reveals the Pilgrims to be motivated solely by “desire to get appointed to a trading-post where ivory was to be had” (Conrad, *Heart* 27). Even at the expense of their fellow Pilgrims. This “self”-centeredness of the Pilgrims appears empty to Marlow, a notion he verbalizes when he describes the brickmaster as a “papier-mâché Mephistopheles” through whom he could poke his finger and “find nothing inside but a little loose dirt, maybe” (29). All of the Pilgrims are so because they lack the one thing that in Marlow’s opinion “redeems” the project of “taking [the earth] away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses”: “an idea at the back of it; not a sentimental pretense but an idea; and an *unselfish* belief in the idea” (10; emphasis added).

Kurtz, on the other hand, is the embodiment of the great ideals behind the colonization, and even in his “fallen state” he transcends the
self-centeredness of the Pilgrims. According to the Russian youth, Kurtz’s state among the natives is one of self-annihilation, not self-idolization: “[he would] forget himself amongst these people — forget himself” (56). The result, as Marlow observes, is that “there was nothing either above or below him. . . . He had kicked himself loose of the earth” (65). Yet Kurtz too is empty on the inside, “hollow at the core” (58). The ideological ramifications of this are enormous. Kurtz and the Pilgrims were to produce an “ideal synthesis” in The Act, yet nothingness combined with nothingness begets only nothingness.

Thus in Jameson’s neutral term (Selflessness/Cynicism as The Witness), the text’s ideological strategy of containment is revealed: to resolve The Act’s apparent failure to achieve any sort of “ideal synthesis,” The Witness must create exactly such a synthesis out of the nothingness in order to allow for narrative closure. Marlow by himself is more than cynical as far as the expedition (The Act) is concerned. Even before his journey he feels the Company is not in Africa because of high-sounding ideals, which he supposedly will represent as well, but merely for profit (16). Yet this same Marlow who has witnessed the hollowness of both the Pilgrims and Kurtz, who sees at Kurtz’s death “the expression of sombre pride, of ruthless power, of craven terror — of an intense and hopeless despair” (68), and who hears those final words that expose what Patrick Brantlinger argues is no more than a “lying idealism which can rationalize any behavior” (381) — this same Marlow, when confronted by the Selflessness of the Intended, affirms this very “lying idealism” with a lie!

The Intended believes in Kurtz and his ideals, and in their ability to transform the expedition. She believes in him with a selflessness (thus she is given no name) exemplified even in her reaction to his death: “‘What a loss to me — to us,’ she corrected herself. . . . ‘To the world’” (74).6 Marlow’s lie then becomes necessary for closure; it is what holds off chaos (the heaven’s fall) and instead in effect affirms the ideal vision of the Intended. In this way the text can close itself off from the nothingness, for the alternative “would have been too dark – too dark altogether” (76). Thus the interaction of the two members of The Witness in the end allows for the hollow nature of The Act to present itself as the ideal synthesis it in truth fails to achieve.

The Jamesonian reading sees this ideological closure as finalized by the resolution of the last two “semic combinations,” which correspond to the two geographical centers of the text. One may appropriate Jameson’s very own words on Nostromo here: The combination of Self and Cynicism is represented by the Congo (in the form of the “nightmare of history”) in that both Marlow’s view of the wilderness as silent, brooding and impenetrable, and the Pilgrims’ view of Africa as only a social and economic opportunity, create an “indeterminate background” of “the classic ‘Anglo’ picture” of a Third World setting that is important only as a pretext for the “real” (read, “Anglo”) story (Jameson 270). Such a view of the Congo only serves to reinforce the privileging of the
world of Idealism and Selflessness as represented by the ideal vision of the Sepulchral City in the form of the unsundered spiritual union of Kurtz and the Intended that remains intact through the lie.

As the Jamesonian (re)appropriation of Greimas intended, the semiotic rectangle has produced a “graphic embodiment of ideological closure” that offers a glimpse of the “informing power” of the hollowness of Heart of Darkness which the text’s ideology of form attempts to repress. Jameson’s observation concerning the Nostramo rectangle would seem to be even more applicable to Heart of Darkness: “Yet such a scheme explains everything but the essential, namely the dynamics of the ideal act itself, of the impossible synthesis or complex term” (277). In other words, the ideological scheme is itself hollow. Thus, Jameson writes of the ideal act in Nostramo, “So the act happens... even though it is impossible” and even though “it turns out that the act, the event, never happened” (278). So in Heart of Darkness: the ideal act happens (as confirmed illusion in Marlow’s lie) even though it never happened (in actuality, all Kurtz and the Pilgrims confirm is hollowness). On this level the text’s attempt at narrative closure must remain unsuccessful: the Sepulchral City can no longer justify its idealism or its Anglo vision of the Congo. In this light, the fact that the heavens do not fall at Marlow’s lie is perhaps more ominous than if they had.

Jameson notes that in Nostramo the “semic space” of Marriage, though supposedly “the place of love... and sexual experience, is dominated by the quite different affective experience of the fainting spell, or of extinction” (277). Similarly, one also may see the same space in Heart of Darkness as dominated by extinction. The marriage of Kurtz and the Intended, like the ideal act itself, never happens. There can be no consummation. Indeed, it is a marriage of emptiness, for the Intended is hollow too in that in her selflessness she does not exist. She only exists in Kurtz, who himself is hollow. Thus the two emissaries of the Sepulchral City (Idealism and Selflessness) are as hollow as, and no better than, the Selfishness and Cynicism that make up the Anglo vision of Africa. The Sepulchral City is truly a “city of the dead” (14), as empty as the Anglo Congo’s impenetrable heart of darkness. Significantly, grass sprouts both in between the city’s stones and Fresleven’s ribs: they are the same. In the final analysis Conrad’s ideology of form leaves one with nothing more than a hollow story, something one might have expected from Marlow to begin with, since for him “the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside” (9) — because there is no inside.

Jameson’s use of Greimas’s schema offers yet another fruitful perspective on Conradian hollowness, and in this the ideology of form ends up providing fresh insight into both Conrad narratives. One may apply Jameson’s conclusion on Nostramo to Heart of Darkness as well:

This... novel finally achieves its end by unravelling its means of expression, “rendering” History by its thoroughgoing demon-
stration of the impossibility of narrating this unthinkable dimension of collective reality, systematically undermining the individual categories of storytelling in order to project, beyond the stories it must continue to tell, the concept of a process beyond storytelling.

(279)

For Jameson, then, what any “meditation on history” discovers is the ultimate inaccessibility of History. History, as absent cause, is never fully present, and as a result one is left with absence. Jameson thus posits that “history itself becomes the ultimate ground as well as the untranscendable limit of our understanding in general and our textual interpretations in particular” (100). Consequently, “history is inaccessible to us except in textual form... it can be approached only by way of prior (re)textualization” (82).

Significantly, however, the absence we are left with is not non-existence, not the nothingness of Heart of Darkness, but rather the inaccessibility of history as absent cause. Although absent, History exists for Jameson as cause. Thus, despite the admittedly textual nature of reality, Jameson claims History itself is not a text because “it is fundamentally non-narrative and nonrepresentational” (82). Such an assumption holds up History as an “extra- or con-textual reality,” which Jameson justifies through the concept of Necessity: he writes, “one does not have to argue the reality of history: necessity, like Dr. Johnson’s stone, does that for us” (82). It is in examining this view of History as “the experience of Necessity” (102) — and the apparent begging of the question which would seem to accompany it — that an avenue opens through which one can expose the ideology behind Jameson’s own critique of ideology.

So far I have demonstrated how impressively Jameson’s reading of Nostromo applies to Heart of Darkness; my initial point here is that Jameson’s The Political Unconscious has much to offer to Conrad studies in particular, and late Victorian/early modernist studies in general. Moving on to my second point now, I want to argue that Jameson himself resorts to the very sort of ideological cover-up he dissected in Conrad.

We may begin unraveling Jameson’s own reading by re-examining his original semiotic rectangle for Nostromo. He writes that “Nostromo is, like Lord Jim, the interrogation of a hole in time, an act whose innermost instant falls away — proving thus at once irrevocable and impossible, a source of scandal and an aporia for contemplation” (264). Although Jameson’s reading of Nostromo is truly insightful and useful, his unshakeable belief that “history itself becomes the ultimate ground as well as the untranscendable limit of our understanding in general and our textual interpretations in particular” (100) leads him to posit his utopian vision as the logical, if not inexcusable, result of this contemplation. I would argue that, in actuality, what Jameson’s reading finally
reveals is its own political unconscious as an ideology that attempts to bear Witness to the efficacy of The Act performed by his own Utopian hermeneutic in conjunction with his Conradian texts as textual representatives of modernism.

The fact that Jameson sees Conrad’s stylistic practice “as ideology and Utopia all at once” (237) is extremely significant. Indeed, this appears to be the underlying assumption upon which his whole reading of Nostromo builds in that he posits Nostromo as “a virtual textbook working out of the structuralist dictum that all narrative enacts a passage from Nature to Culture” (272), a passage that one may say has been achieved at the book’s conclusion by the successful establishment of the capitalistic Republic of Sulaco.

Since for Jameson modernism “is itself an ideological expression of capitalism” (236), on the one hand the ideology of form in Nostromo is no more than a reiteration of the capitalistic ideology of commodity fetishism. Jameson rightfully sees the book, for instance, as perpetuating traditional European stereotyping of Latin Americans in an objectifying process that at bottom casts them as Other. Yet Jameson’s aforementioned conception of Conrad’s stylistic practice allows him to see the text as containing utopian as well as ideological elements. Jameson sees his reading as establishing the possibility that “we can restore, at least methodologically, the lost unity of social life, and demonstrate that widely distant elements of the social totality are ultimately part of the same global historical process” (226). Here, although the particular manifestation may not be appealing, Sulaco capitalism nevertheless represents a transformation of the focus upon the individual to a “new perspective” of “collective destiny” (269). This is because, for Jameson, even “ruling-class culture and ideology are Utopian, not in spite of their instrumental function to secure and perpetuate class privilege and power, but rather precisely because that function is also in and of itself the affirmation of collective solidarity” (291). Again, any affirmation of collective solidarity only ultimately confirms History as “the experience of Necessity” (102).

Jameson himself points out the major flaw in his Greimassian schematic, that it “explains everything but the essential, namely the dynamics of the ideal act [The Act] itself” (277). For Jameson, the fact that “the historical Event which marks a decisive shift from one state of things (fallen nature) to another (genuine society)” (278) presents itself as an aporia only serves as further proof that History is non-narratable, “inaccessible to us except in textual form” (82). Yet it may be that there can be no explanation of the aporia simply because Jameson’s own ideological schema(tic) ultimately does not work; it is itself hollow.

Jameson seems to me one of the great critical minds of his generation, so much so that I have a difficult time believing that he may be unaware of the following ramifications of his argument. I only can assume (in spite of the proverbial dangers contained within that word) that Jameson feels his end justifies his means, that it is more important
to narrate a compelling story of the priority of his version of Marxist utopianism than it is to craft an air-tight argument (when, after all, what argument is air-tight?), and therefore that he engages in what I will call deliberate miswriting.

What I mean by deliberate miswriting actually involves two interrelated misleading attempts at a cover-up (or, perhaps, merely a make-over) in Jameson’s presentation of his own argument. First, Jameson mixes in some post-structuralist vocabulary to give the appearance that this is a text of post-Althusserian critical Marxism when in fact this is a text by a dyed-in-the-wool traditional Marxist whose devotion to the cause actually ends up undermining the very sort of dialectical criticism he espouses. Second, Jameson engages in his own ideological strategies of containment in order to ensure that his own narrative of utopian idealism may achieve its end.

Critiquing Jameson’s critique is difficult because he adroitly masks his own ideology under the guise of a post-structuralist rendering of the concept of Necessity: it is “a retextualization of History which does not propose [History] as some new representation or ‘vision,’ some new context, but as the formal effects of . . . ‘absent cause’” (102). Because “History can only be apprehended through its effects,” according to Jameson it avoids reification (102). This is why he (once again begging the question) claims that history as untranscendable horizon “needs no particular theoretical justification” — because “its alienating necessities will not forget us” (102). Yet this is where he exposes the universalizing tendencies of his approach. As noted earlier, no matter how skeptically he may render his concept of History as absent cause, it is finally simply another form of idealism because, whether or not History is absent or inaccessible, it still is, it still exists as cause (and as a cause which manifests itself “through its effects,” however retextualized those effects may be).

Jameson, for whom “History is . . . the experience of Necessity” (102), is in fact a conservative Marxist as will be readily apparent throughout the rest of this essay. He consistently comes down on the side of those heroes of traditional Marxism, Hegel and Lukács, and adopts phenomenological, structuralist, and theological frameworks from Ernst Bloch, Emile Durkheim, Paul Ricoeur, and Jean-Paul Sartre in ways that potentially compromise the very “dialectical” nature of his critique. For instance, when Jameson relates the crucial dynamics of The Act in Nostromo, it is with self-professed recourse to “classical Sartrean language” (278) and then to “more Hegelian terminology” (279) — all in the service of a structuralist schematic that one will recall he himself admits is “perhaps indeed misappropriated, by a dialectical criticism” (48).

Much of Jameson’s theorizing in The Political Unconscious finds its ground in his earlier work Marxism and Form, and in fact he develops these ideas in stages across the essays collected in The Ideologies of Theory, most of which date from the years between the two major works.
Throughout the rest of this essay, I will draw upon both of these texts to supplement my argument about The Political Unconscious.

Accordingly, turning now to Marxism and Form, we see Jameson consistently revealing his Hegelian stripes throughout this text, but perhaps nowhere more blatantly than where he insists that the “impossibility of the Hegelian system for us is not a proof of its intellectual limitations, its cumbersome methods and theological superstructure; on the contrary, it is a judgment on us and on the moment in history in which we live, and in which such a vision of the totality of things is no longer possible” (Marxism 47). Marxism and Form also, of course, contains a whole chapter in support of Lukács (perhaps the singlemost representative figure of twentieth-century traditional Marxism) while the chapter on Adorno (who for most stands opposite Lukács, aligned with critical Marxism) concludes with the passive-aggressive suggestion, “It is therefore not to the discredit of Negative Dialektik to say that it is in the long run a massive failure” (Marxism 58). Tellingly, Jameson also devotes chapters to Sartrean phenomenology and to a Marxist hermeneutic that incorporates versions of nostalgia (Walter Benjamin), romantic utopianism (Herbert Marcuse, in articulation with Friedrich Schiller), and theological utopianism (Bloch). The conservatism of Jameson’s Marxism lies in his strict alignment with the Old Guard, and his critical facade is at bottom largely an attempt to dress up that Old Guard in more contemporary clothing (“meet the new boss — same as the old boss”). What is more, Jameson’s universalizing tendencies and his teleological narrative actually go further than this by cutting against the grain of genuine dialectical criticism as he himself defines it.

According to Jameson, true dialectical thought is “essentially process: it never attains some ultimate place of systematic truth in which it can henceforth rest” (Marxism 372). Because of this “antisystematic thrust” (Marxism 362) to dialectical thought, one should see Marxism as “a critical rather than a systematic philosophy” (Marxism 365). Consequently, “a genuinely dialectical criticism” must never employ any “pre-established categories of analysis” (Marxism 333) and must instead go so far as to “always include a commentary on its own intellectual instruments as part of its own working structure” (Marxism 336) — for “dialectical thought is in its very structure self-consciousness” (Marxism 340).

Yet Jameson’s argument in The Political Unconscious seems to present both the dynamics of the narrative mode and the dialectic of utopia and ideology as exactly such “pre-established categories of analysis,” and together they seem to lead to an “ultimate place of systematic truth” — namely, the utopian “realm of Freedom” which Marxism is to wrest “from a realm of Necessity” (19). This utopia is the telos of the “single great collective story” that only Marxism can retell as a “unity” and thereby tap the “original urgency” of many pressing matters by its insistence upon representing “the human adventure as one” (19).

The “absolute formalism” (Marxism 373) and the “structural historicism” that in “squaring the circle” is the “Marxist ‘solution’ to the dilem-
ma of historicism” (Marxism 172) seem at odds with the “dialectical and historical self-consciousness” also associated with Marxism’s “squad[ing] the circle” (Marxism 373). In The Ideologies of Theory Jameson finds fault with the sort of “structural typology” he associates with Hayden White in that it is ultimately grounded in “a narrative or teleological vision of history” (“Marxism” 169). Yet his own structural historicism seems similarly flawed. He claims that (his) Marxism is not a “place of truth” or of “dogma,” clarifying that “only the Utopian future is a place of truth” (“Marxism” 176) — but it bears observing that it is this actual “place of truth” that awaits Jameson’s “single great collective story” which in The Political Unconscious is Marxism’s “compelling resolution to the dilemma of historicism” (19).

Here we seem to have both teleology and dogma. Should not a properly “dialectical” Jameson be more self-conscious of the rhetorical implications of his insistence upon the “priority of Marxist analysis as that of some ultimate and untranscendable semantic horizon,” the (in his own words) “master code” (“Marxism” 48) of the same History as absent cause that grounds his argument in The Political Unconscious? Especially when he also refers to this conception of History as absent cause as the “transcendental signified” (“Marxism” 49) of his Marxist hermeneutic? He seems curiously unaware or unconcerned with his terminology elsewhere — for example, in his appropriation of Ricoeur’s distinction between negative and positive hermeneutics in Marxism and Form (which obviously then resurfaces in the conclusion to The Political Unconscious), where he appears to privilege a positive hermeneutics that offers “a restoration of some original, forgotten meaning” and “renewed access to some essential source of life” (Marxism 119; emphasis added). While Jameson does go on to imply that Ricoeur’s failure to imagine this “essential source of life” as “anything other than the sacred” limits his view of the positive hermeneutic to “an essentially religious one” (Marxism 119), Jameson seems thoroughly untroubled by his own utopianism’s religious overtones, if not its actual theological nature.

Indeed, in Marxism and Form Jameson suggests there is a “basic affinity between Marxism and religion,” which at least in part is founded upon their shared “claim to universality” (Marxism 117). He even admits that this fact raises “the suspicion that Bloch is not so much a Marxist philosopher, even a Marxist philosopher of religion, as he is (in the terms of his description of Thomas Münzer) a ‘theologian of the revolution’” (Marxism 117). I suggest here that Jameson has himself taken up this mantle of “theologian of the revolution” from Bloch, who remains the most profound influence upon his own utopianism. Tellingly, in his discussion of Bloch he recasts Ricoeur’s distinction between negative and positive hermeneutics as a distinction between “the realm of philosophical judgment” and the realm of “hermeneutic interpretation” (Marxism 132). As he does so he characterizes the former as “operating” from a “critical” standpoint and the latter as operating “from a prophetic standpoint” (Marxism 132).
Here we have Jameson as not only Theologian of the Revolution but even more suggestively as Prophet of the Revolution. He clearly privileges the positive prophetic standpoint of the realm of hermeneutic interpretation over the merely negative functioning of the critical standpoint of the realm of philosophical judgment. He writes, “When we pass over into the [realm of hermeneutic interpretation], matters of truth and falsehood give way to techniques of conversion, to modes of recovering that which is authentic and instinct even within the most regressive forms, to a decipherment of the figures of hope beneath the immediate surface realities of despair or destiny” (Marxism 132).

This is, ultimately, the project of The Political Unconscious. I want to be very clear that I do not wish to be read here as some sort of critical killjoy. I am not suggesting that the “decipherment of figures of hope beneath the immediate surface realities of despair or destiny” is pointless, or that all utopian reading in particular and all positive hermeneutics in general are quixotic. My point is that, in the intellectual arrogance of its self-assuredness where its own necessity and priority is concerned, Jameson’s version gives such readings a bad name. The subsumption of all other interpretations under Jameson’s Marxist hermeneutic must appear misguided (if not elitist) to non-Marxists, and even to many post-Althusserian Marxists as well. Even more so, Jameson’s conceptions of History and Necessity reveal his dialectical vision as that of a retro-traditional Marxism. When he not only posits an “inexorable logic involved in the determinate failure” of all “local” revolutions (102), but also sees even in such failures a “simultaneously Utopian power as the symbolic affirmation of a specific historical and class form of collective unity” (291), we are left with what might be called a Utopian determinism.

Jameson’s semiotic rectangle does achieve his goal of exposing the ideological closure in Conrad as hollow, but in spite of all this he immediately resubmerges the threat of such hollowness under the waters of History in an ultimately utopian gesture that reveals an equally hollow ideological closure in The Political Unconscious itself. That this is indeed the case in Jameson’s critique, if only suspected at first, becomes manifestly clear in the concluding chapter of The Political Unconscious. Here Jameson states that “all class consciousness . . . all ideology . . . is in its very nature Utopian” (289). He can be content with absence as long as it is not the threat of hollowness, of the meaninglessness of non-narrative history. But his analysis of the ideology of form has uncovered a nothingness perhaps too reminiscent of nihilism for his liking. Such a negative hermeneutic, one that merely uncovers hollowness, is for Jameson insufficient: “a Marxist negative hermeneutic, a Marxist practice of ideological analysis proper, must in the practical work of reading and interpretation be exercised simultaneously with a Marxist positive hermeneutic, or a decipherment of the Utopian impulses of these same still ideological cultural texts” (296). How then does a Jamesonian approach decipher Utopian impulses in Heart of Darkness when, as
Philip Wood argues, it would seem only to uncover “the futility, the delusions, and criminal compromises fatally attendant upon all action once its inescapably social imbrication within an alienating world is recognized” (44)? When such a “hollow” novel only seems to thereby “justify any injustice” (Brantlinger 380)?

Jameson’s solution is to argue that an ideology, no matter what it may entail, “expresses the unity of a collectivity” (291). Thus, even “ruling-class culture and ideology are Utopian, not in spite of their instrumental function to secure and perpetuate class privilege and power, but rather precisely because that function is also in and of itself the affirmation of collective solidarity” (291). In other words, the very existence of an ideology of class consciousness, although not utopian in itself, is Utopian because it functions as a figure “for the ultimate concrete collective life of an achieved Utopian or classless society” (291). This is, again, a direct result of Jameson’s view of History as ultimate ground, for although an absent cause, its reality is experienced in Necessity (and here experienced as the necessity of class conflict that the presence of ideology guarantees). For Jameson, then, any narrative, no matter how completely it seeks to represent or perpetuate the ideology of the ruling class, ultimately functions as evidence and as justification of the utopian impulse owing to the dialectic of utopia and ideology. Finally, one is left with what amounts to some sort of Utopian determinism, the Necessity of the future Utopian place of truth.

Clearly such a reading would not seem particularly attractive to critics concerned with the imperialism, racism, and sexism in Heart of Darkness. Jameson’s Utopian master stroke would seem, on one level, to “justify any injustice” even more so than the hollowness he has attempted to offset in his conclusion. As in Marlow’s endorsement of what he sees as a good kind of imperialism, an “idea at the back of it” redeems Jameson’s project. In his conclusion Jameson himself belies precisely such an orientation when he complains that the Althusserian and post-structuralist critiques are insufficient in that they “have a purely negative or second-degree critical function, and offer no new conceptual categories,” when “what is wanted here . . . is a whole new logic of collective dynamics, with categories that escape the taint of some mere application of terms drawn from individual experience” (294; emphasis added). Because Jameson wants such a new logic, he turns to Durkheim’s theory of religion to restore some sort of positive hermeneutic more in line with his own Utopian impulse to locate Utopian impulses in all texts. Although he claims “serious reservations” must be expressed about this move from both Marxist and post-structuralist positions because it amounts to “a generalization of Durkheim’s theory of religion to cultural production as a whole” (292), he proceeds to put these reservations to rest until he has justified the necessity of a positive hermeneutic as well.

In a note on the observation, by Barry Hindess and Paul Hirst, that a Durkheimian problematic and Marxism are incompatible, Jameson
remarks, "One is tempted to add: in that case, too bad for Marxism" (296). As Geoff Bennington cleverly points out, what Jameson is actually saying in the remark is, too bad for Fredric Jameson’s Marxism (31)! In any case, Jameson justifies his recourse to Durkheim’s religious theory by noting that, until the task of theorizing this “whole new logic of collective dynamics” is completed, “it seems possible to continue to use a Durkheimian or Lukácsian vocabulary of collective consciousness or of the subject of history ‘under erasure,’” as long as it is understood that this vocabulary refers “to the as yet untheorized object — the collective — to which they make imperfect allusion” (294). As Jameson articulates the value of religion for Marxism in Marxism and Form, one begins to comprehend the function of his religious utopianism as individual wish-fulfillment: "The value of religion for revolutionary activity lies therefore in its structure as a hypostasis of absolute conviction, as a passionate inner subjective coming to consciousness of those deepest Utopian wishes without which Marxism remains an objective theory and is deprived of its most vital resonances and of its most essential psychic sustenance" (Marxism 157).

Jameson himself claims that "every universalizing approach . . . will . . . conceal its own contradictions and repress its own historicity by strategically framing its perspective so as to omit the negative, absence, contradiction, repression, the non-dit, or the impensé" (109-10). At this point I would like to suggest that the Greimassian semiotic rectangle actually might be employed to tilt into view the impensé (the political unconscious) of The Political Unconscious, to furnish us with "the graphic embodiment" of the "ideological closure" in Jameson’s own text. I offer Utopia and Modernism as the primary pair of contraries in the text (S and -S), which in turn generate the subcontraries of Ideology and Marxism respectively. Ironically, one could argue for an affinity between each corner of this new rectangle and its Conradian counterpart according to Jameson. The Utopian (with its idée fixe of a future Utopian place of truth) would fulfill a role similar to that of Jameson’s Ideal, while Modernism (with its stereotypical isolation of the individual trapped within one’s own consciousness) would fulfill a role similar to that of Jameson’s Self. Marxism (with its transcendence of the individual in favor of the collective) would fulfill a role similar to that of Jameson’s Selflessness, while Ideology (with its inherent opposition to and stereotypical denial of the necessity of the utopian happy ending) would fulfill a role similar to that of Jameson’s Cynicism. One might even construct similar semic combinations at the vertical sides — with Modernism and Ideology combining to reveal History in late capitalist commodity fetishism as a semic space of castration, and with Utopian idealism and Marxism combining to reveal their unconsummated Marriage in the pages of The Political Unconscious itself as a semic space of extinction.

The workings of the new rectangle’s complex term (the ideal synthesis of Utopia and Modernism) nicely follows the lines of Jameson’s own dissection of Nostromo: "the act happens" (278) — the Utopian
combines with the Modernist text somehow to confirm that "all ideology . . . is in its very nature Utopian" (289) — "even though it is impossible" (278). As far as The Witness is concerned, neither Marxism nor Ideology (within the context of Jameson's "story" of The Political Unconscious) is willing or able to expose the illusion or lie of his deliberate miswriting of the triumph of Utopian Necessity. If only The Political Unconscious, like Nostromo in Jameson's reading, could have "[kept] faith with this impossibility and insist[ed] to the end on everything problematical about the act that makes for genuine historical change" (277).

Modernism (which, again, here should be read as including Late Victorian Aestheticism, Decadence, and Fin de Siècle) is that against which Jameson's Marxism defines itself. In "Reflections on the Brecht-Lukács Debate" and elsewhere, Jameson makes it very clear that contemporary Marxism is still hashing through this debate's pair of contraries, modernism and realism. It is nevertheless very clear which side Jameson feels represents the truth about modernism: It is Lukács both "who has some provisional last word for us today" where this debate is concerned ("Reflections" 146) and who "turns out in the long run to have been right after all about the nature of modernism" ("Beyond" 130). The "ideology of modernism," according to Jameson, "imposes its conceptual limitations on our aesthetic thinking and our taste and judgments, and in its own way projects an utterly distorted model of literary history," which leads him to bemoan our unfamiliarity with "the older social and cultic functions of literature" ("Beyond" 117).

Along these same lines, for Jameson modernist texts are "ways of distorting and repressing reality" that attempt to "manage" rather than "express" the "same fears and concerns" which serve as the "raw material of revolutionary art" by "disguis[ing] them, and driv[ing] them underground" ("Modernism" 179). Wary that an iconoclastic "repudiation" of such works only would "reconfirm the reified prestige, and as it were the sacred aura, of these fetishized names and reputations," Jameson advocates a process "on the order of the psychoanalytic working through" that could "be expected to dissolve the reification of the great modernist works, and to return these artistic and academic 'monuments' to their original reality as the private language of isolated individuals in a reified society" ("Modernism" 179).

One need only recall that Jameson in The Political Unconscious posits modernism as "itself an ideological expression of capitalism" (236) to understand the significance of his hearkening back to this older focus of Marxist critique before Althusser (the nature of modernism, as opposed to the nature of ideology): as reflected in my semiotic rectangle, modernism and ideology are written as two sides of the same late capitalistic commodity fetishism coin (the return of the old standby false consciousness with a vengeance). In this light, the imaginary resolution of The Political Unconscious at bottom is a Utopian gesture intent on denying the terrifying possibilities of the abyss of nihilism that the
Conradian text in particular and modernism in general opens before Jameson. This gesture ultimately must subsume all ideology within a Utopian Necessity to effect the ideal synthesis of Jameson's complex term. It is this Utopian Necessity which serves as the idea at the back of Jameson's project that redeems it (and his deliberate miswriting of it) in Jameson's mind.

It is perhaps not pure coincidence that the formalist means by which Jameson arrives at this Utopian Necessity is indebted to Marin's work on the Utopian narrative. In fact, Jameson borrows the tool of the Greimassian semiotic rectangle from Marin, within whose project the rectangle is used as a model for the Utopian narrative proper rather than for narrative in general. What wonder, then, that Jameson's use of this same schema in The Political Unconscious yields an ultimately Utopian reading of the ideology of form. Is it possible that it is Jameson's Utopian model itself that (pre)determines the Utopian outcome in The Political Unconscious?

Marin writes that Utopian reading leads one to the ironically very Conradian-sounding "realization that the way in which the story is told is the story itself, that the narrative never in reality narrates anything other than its own narrative procedures" (qtd. in "Of Islands" 101). Jameson clearly has taken Marin's realization to heart. Jameson concludes his essay on Marin with an analogy for "our inability to conceive [Utopia], our incapacity to produce it as a vision, our failure to project the Other of what is" ("Of Islands" 101) — it is an image of "fireworks dissolving back into the night sky, [which] must once again leave us alone with this history" that Jameson offers as a figure for this failure.

Jameson opens the final section of his concluding chapter to Marxism and Form (a section entitled "Marxism and Inner Form") with an epigraph from Schiller. He reads this epigraph as suggesting a "dialectical notion of form and content" in which "either term can be translated into the other" (Marxism 403). He elaborates, "In fact, this essential distinction is useful only on condition that it ultimately reabolish itself in the ambiguity of the artistic substance itself, which can be seen alternately as either all content or all form" (Marxism 403). I argue, however, that Jameson is profoundly uncomfortable with this ambiguity, with the hazy after-glow of fireworks dissolving back into the night sky. He is profoundly uncomfortable with the sort of stories attributed by Conrad's narrator to the Marlow of Heart of Darkness: "to him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze" (9). He is profoundly uncomfortable with the utopic haze of undecidability represented by the Conradian after-glow.

Instead, Jameson offers the self-termed "materialistic kernel" of Schiller's remark (the "materialistic kernel" to the properly dialectical "ambiguity" of Schiller's romantic irony) as being that "any stylization or abstraction in a work's form must ultimately express some profound inner logic in its content, and is itself ultimately dependent for its exis-
tence on the structures of the social raw materials themselves" (Marxism 403). Thus Jameson's restatement of Schiller's aforementioned "dialectical notion of form and content" in which "either term can be translated into the other" is: "thus every layer of content proves, as Schiller implies, . . . but a form in disguise" (Marxism 403). Clearly when Jameson appears to concur with Schiller that "the ambiguity of the artistic substance itself . . . can be seen alternately as either all content or all form," he in fact prefers to see the artistic substance as all form, all the time. Jameson requires such a "materialistic kernel of truth" to ground his Utopian determinism, and in this he veers into Ideology at the expense of the very dialectic of utopia and ideology itself.

In conclusion, returning to Althusser's "A Letter on Art," while the Jamesonian critique does indeed demonstrate that on one level "what art makes us see . . . is the ideology from which it is born, in which it bathes, from which it detaches itself as art, and to which it alludes," by introducing the notion of the Utopian impulse Jameson would seem to imply that it also imparts some sort of knowledge of History as the experience of Necessity (even if this knowledge is only in the form of retextualized effects). This seems to transgress the line of seeing "conclusions without premisses" [sic] and instead produces "conclusions' out of 'premisses'" [sic] (Althusser 205). One must question whether Jameson has ignored Althusser's warning of "mov[ing] too quickly to 'something else,'" and in so doing has arrived at "an ideology of art" (Althusser 208). In the final analysis Jameson's project of articulating a new Marxist hermeneutic that among other things must "come to terms" with "History itself as one long nightmare" (299) can appear as nothing more than Jameson's own ideological "choice of nightmares" (Conrad, Heart 62); like Marlow before him, Jameson is unable faithfully to render to the hollowness of Kurtz (indeed of Heart of Darkness itself) "that justice which was [its] due" (76).

Notes

1. One must recall that Heart of Darkness originally was published serially in 1899 in Blackwood's Magazine as "The Heart of Darkness." I also think it important to acknowledge the ways in which late Victorian Aestheticism, Decadence, and the Fin de Siècle represents the true beginning of modernism.

2. Such disagreements often have revolved around the status of modernist texts such as Conrad's rather than upon the proper definition of ideology. On one side the Marxism of Georg Lukács denounced the "false subjectivism" of modern writers as inherently solipsistic and nihilistic, and as a means of avoiding and thereby perpetuating the historical reality of late capitalism. On the other, the Marxism of Theodor Adorno admired the modernist's fragmented subjectivism as offering a critique of the very "commodity fetishism" it represents. Althusser's
Marxism incorporated both of these views in his reconception of ideology. For Althusser, the "internal distantiation" Adorno would argue Conrad achieves at the same time "presupposes" the presence of "that ideology itself" (203), as Lukács would have it. Though this brief summary is inevitably reductive, the point here is that Althusser refocuses the Marxist critique by concentrating on what is meant by ideology.

3. All subsequent citations of Jameson are from The Political Unconscious unless otherwise indicated.

4. Interestingly, Jameson writes of his use of Greimas, "Thus appropriated, or perhaps indeed misappropriated, by a dialectical criticism . . . " (48).

5. All subsequent citations of Conrad are from the Norton edition of Heart of Darkness unless otherwise indicated.

6. One should note here perhaps, that Marlow himself is not without his own admiration of (if not disbelief in) Kurtz in spite of his cynicism: "This is the reason why I affirm that Kurtz was a remarkable man. He had something to say [which Marlow does not] . . . . He had summed up — he had judged. 'The horror!'" (69).

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