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Of Stones and Flowers
Non-Teleocratic Readings of Style

Jameson, Conrad and style in modernism

Despite not being literary critics in the traditional sense of the term, Gadamer, Derrida and Blanchot are fundamentally concerned with responding to literature. However, their legacy is not a formulaic or easily replicable method of reading but an attention to the paradoxically-always-singular-demand that literature has on us. Trying to read their work with the aim of finding an approach or a method, which can then be applied to any text, would not only lead to frustration but also go against the grain of their thinking. The programmability of method and what Gadamer calls the ‘cult of the expert’ (GE 170) are key assumptions in certain practices of reading literature – belonging to what Derrida provocatively describes as the ‘library of poetics’ (CC 295) – that they problematise. In view of this, rather than attempting to provide a method to be validated elsewhere, the strategy of this chapter is to respond, almost exclusively, to the eventhood of style in one of Celan’s lyrics, ‘Flower’ (‘Blume’). Such exclusivity, however, will always have to remain tentative. For the purpose of comparison, the close-reading of Celan’s lyric is here preceded by several counter-textual (with and against) readings of style. We begin with Jameson’s analysis of Joseph Conrad’s style and an application of this method to an excerpt from Charles Dickens’s Bleak House. If a reading of style, even of the kind which posits itself as a singular response to a singular demand, is to be compared to any other reading or method, as is done here, then it must be inherently open to some form of iteration.

The origins of style, in Jameson’s view, are to be found in the ‘deeper drama of […] the mode of production’.

1 Style, for him, is an aspect of form that carries (rather than simply expressing) ‘ideological messages’
that are ‘distinct from the ostensible and manifest content of the work’ (PU 84). In direct contradistinction to Wilde’s argument that any style may be produced at any point in time because art creates life more than imitating it, Jameson insists that style is inextricably attached to the historical temporality of its production to the extent that, as a critical concept, style is only relevant in modernism.

In The Political Unconscious, Jameson employs the Freudian model of the unconscious to theorise that the ‘ground bass of material production’ is inescapable even when it is ‘managed’, rather than highlighted by the text (PU 203). For Jameson, every text has a ‘political unconscious’ and ‘in the last analysis’ everything is ‘political’ even when the overt content or theme of a text presents itself as apolitical (PU 5). The fact that for Jameson even the very attempt to escape from politics through form or style is politically significant explains why despite Jameson’s primary interest in ideology, he recurrently resorts to close reading of style, reflecting his belief that history is ‘inaccessible to us except in textual form’ and ‘our approach to it and to the Real itself necessarily passes through its prior textualization’ (PU 20). For Jameson, textuality cannot be separated from the Real because our access to it can only ever come after its textualisation. As such, history may ‘only be apprehended through its effects’ as they appear in textual form (PU 88).

Urging us to ‘always historicize’, Jameson analyses a succession of nineteenth and early twentieth century texts by writers as varied as George Gissing, Henry James, Honore de Balzac and Conrad, showing how literary form can be understood as an ambivalent response to the changing dynamics of the modes of production (PU ix). In particular, Jameson concentrates on the changes that define the movement towards modernism and on how these changes are embodied in literature. As a literary period, modernism announces the autonomy of the work of art and the need to constantly experiment with stylistic innovation. Social realism and political engagement are seemingly sidelined in favour of a more concentrated focus on individual subjectivity, the construction and expression of limited points of view and the development of highly-wrought and recognisable styles. Moving further away from the rhetorical expectation of following established models and conventions, early twentieth century modernists turn to literary language and mould it in their own image in an attempt to inscribe a sense of the individual self in form and style.

Jameson excavates the modernist ‘unconscious’ buried beneath this prioritisation of style, which he considers to be a ‘relatively recent phenomenon’, and finds that style comes into being ‘along with the middle-class world itself’. Unlike rhetoric, a precapitalist concern with the social