‘The Masses Make History’:

On Jameson’s *Allegory and Ideology*

**Abstract**

This essay responds to Frederic Jameson’s *Allegory and Ideology* by arguing that this book is centrally concerned with the masses. By developing Jameson’s own model of allegorical reading the pressure of the masses on the text is explored. This is demonstrated through a reading of Albert Camus’s *The Plague*, Jameson’s central example of ‘bad’ allegory. While this novel is ‘bad’ for implying a one-to-one allegory between the plague infection and the occupation of France during World War Two or to the human condition, a reading of the text as biopolitical allegory reveals the complex presence of the masses. Finally, this response considers the ‘immortality’ of the masses as the utopian moment traced within *Allegory and Ideology*.

Keywords: Jameson; Masses; Allegory; Biopolitics; Camus; Immortality

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Fredric Jameson’s *Allegory and Ideology* is a book of collectives. It is not only a book swarming with figures, texts, debates, examples, emotions, and ‘levels’, but it is also a book *of* the masses. Jameson notes the ‘underground theme’ of the work is ‘the pressure of population on form and thought’.[[1]](#footnote-1) In Jameson’s recent work ‘population’ displaces ‘the masses’ to refer to a new demographic reality emerging as a result of decolonisation and the globalisation of capitalism.[[2]](#footnote-2) In *Allegory and Ideology* population is inflected towards Jameson’s concern with making a liveable earth – what is called, in a provocative formulation, the ‘terraforming of the earth’.[[3]](#footnote-3) While these are vital concerns here I want to make a more traditional reading by returning to the ‘level’ of collectives or the masses as makers and unmakers of history. The masses appear in this text and also reveal themselves as the subject of the text. To make this appearance apparent is a matter of reading, of reading allegorically, of reading the levels, and of reading for the masses. It is that reading, beset with difficulties and possibilities, which I want to make. Raymond Williams remarks: ‘There are no masses; there are only ways of seeing people as masses’.[[4]](#footnote-4) This is no doubt true to an extent and my text is vulnerable on this count and others to the accusation of projection. If, however, we do not see people as masses at all that is also a problem in that it makes the masses disappear. The risk of ‘seeing people as masses’ is one I want to run here as a way of grasping the peculiarities of Jameson’s monumental text.

At one point in *Allegory and Ideology* Jameson notes how Aijaz Ahmad accused him of surreptitious Maoism in his text on the third world and national allegory, reprinted here with a commentary. This was related to Jameson’s use of the slogan of Lin Biao: ‘The contemporary world revolution presents a picture of the encirclement of the cities by the rural areas’.[[5]](#footnote-5) For Ahmad this was a sign of an orientation to the peasantry, and Jameson admits to a liking for the desire expressed in the peasant revolutions of the twentieth century.[[6]](#footnote-6) As an aside, more could be written about this relationship among left intellectuals and Marxists to the peasantry – to the ‘tragic’ role it played in communist revolution, and to its ongoing disappearance due to capitalist agriculture. We find this in Jameson, especially in his discussion of the peasant utopia in Platonov’s novel Chevengur,[[7]](#footnote-7) Brecht’s taste for peasant cunning and wisdom,[[8]](#footnote-8) John Berger’s critical and fictional writing,[[9]](#footnote-9) and across T. J. Clark’s art-historical interrogation of modernity.[[10]](#footnote-10) To return to the masses, which are also the peasant masses, Jameson could be said to carry the traces of the Maoist ‘mass line’: Mao’s corrective emphasis on the creativity and potentials of the masses, even if this emphasis could result in the worst forms of voluntarism. We could also recall Althusser’s encrypted reference to Mao in *Essays in Self-Criticism*, with the statement ‘the masses make history’.[[11]](#footnote-11) The masses intrude into the seemingly impregnable structuralist fortress of Althusserianism. They also intrude into this in many ways strange book, although here they welcomed even if that is not always obvious.

The masses appear as a ‘pressure’ within Jameson’s text, itself at once a ‘loose baggy monster’ (as Henry James described the Victorian novel) and an attempt at a rigorous modelling of texts as particular and peculiar structures. This tension, between event and structure, repeats itself in the pressure of the masses on and within this text. The pressure of the masses is not only evident in the use of Mao, but also to Jameson’s references to Gilles Deleuze, here and elsewhere in Jameson’s writing. This is the Deleuze of *Cinema 2*, who writes of the invention of a ‘people to come’. [[12]](#footnote-12) For Deleuze, the people are not simply formed or given by cinema but given a place in which to appear, or even ‘invented’ (which is where projection can enter with a vengeance), in this case by third world cinema. An art work does not show the people, but the absence where they could appear. Deleuze’s concern with the people and with their appearance, or better clearing a space for their appearance, echoes in Jameson’s text. The aim is not so much a direct rendering of the masses, vulnerable to the kinds of projection detailed by Raymond Williams, but of making a space for the masses within the text.

We could also add here the collectives that appear in Kafka’s texts in the reading by Deleuze and Guattari.[[13]](#footnote-13) This work famously refers to the ‘minor’ and to the issue of the minorities in relation to the textual space of Kafka’s writing. The seemingly hermetic and sealed modernist text is, in fact, overrun with collective forces. For Deleuze and Guattari, the minor is a mode of writing that is political and collective, as they write ‘*literature is the people’s concern*’.[[14]](#footnote-14) So, the minor is not opposed to the masses, it is even the language of the masses, but one constricted and constrained by the ‘major’. Finally, Jameson’s consideration of imperial texts, or texts concerned with empire, especially Dante and Spenser, indicates a pressure of the people and an enlargement that orients towards the group, even if in the mode of domination.[[15]](#footnote-15) This may connect with the Kafka of that strange formation the Austro-Hungarian empire, and also to the tensions that emerge in both Deleuze and Guattari, and explicitly thematised with Jameson, concerning national liberation struggles. A whole range of potential and contradictory collectives emerge out of the experience of the masses.

The masses are not simply outside these structures or simply some intrusive and vital force, as in some variations of Maoism in which voluntarism and vitalism go together, or in some contemporary theorisations of the multitude.[[16]](#footnote-16) If the masses make history they do not, to refer to Marx, make it under circumstances of their own making.[[17]](#footnote-17) These conditions include the ‘practico-inert’, as described by Sartre and redeployed elsewhere by Jameson,[[18]](#footnote-18) the congealing of activity and making into structure and ideology. In fact, as is evident in this work’s use of allegory to finesse structure and event, in many ways Jameson is still worrying at the problem of history and structure that preoccupied Sartre in the failed synthesis of *The Critique of Dialectical Reason*. Jameson writes self-consciously and with awareness after Claude Lévi-Strauss’s devastating critique of Sartre’s attempted ‘totalisation’.[[19]](#footnote-19) Jameson, then, constantly tries to restore and rework the problem of totality through the integration of structure and dialectic.

In Jameson’s terms in this book we have the ‘structure’ of the text, which are the conditions of making history, and then the reading which can reveal how that history has been made. Reading returns process to structure. The structure is based on the four levels of traditional allegorical reading proposed by Origen: the literal (what narrative the text tells), the allegorical (the relation to other sacred texts, typically between the New Testament and the Old Testament), the moral (the individual’s soul), and the anagogical (concerned with the afterlife and the future). For Jameson, obviously, these levels can be secularised and rendered as a complex and contradictory structural form. To risk a translation of Jameson’s multiple and singular readings of texts through these different levels here and elsewhere we could propose a ‘modern’ (or postmodern) rendition: the ideological or mythic (the literal), in the Barthes sense of everyday myths or what Althusser called ‘spontaneous ideology’;[[20]](#footnote-20) the initial interpretive level or the kind of interpretive reading the text poses of itself, for example Margaret Atwood’s *Handmaid’s Tale* as a conscious critique of the alliance of anti-pornography feminism with the religious right (allegorical or mystical); the individual in the psychoanalytic sense of the divided self (moral); and the masses making history and being made by history (anagogical). This is a simplification of Jameson’s four-fold schema, which not only distinguishes these levels but traces their overlaps and interrelations, hence Jameson’s preference for the Greimas square.[[21]](#footnote-21) The collective, my concern here, is not limited to the anagogical level, but can appear elsewhere in Jameson’s readings. In terms of a general schema, however, this forced translation captures something of the masses as they surge through the book, even as that might not be apparent at first sight. The masses appear as the condition of history and of the future as their ‘afterlife’.

The revelation of the role of the masses is a matter of reading. Allegorical reading is a reading that reveals the multiple and contradictory structure of the text in its production, including the levels or dimensions of history and the collective. Allegorical reading is an ‘interpretive virus’ or ‘dangerous contagion’ that multiplies levels of reading within the textual host.[[22]](#footnote-22) Allegory and allegorical reading find their enemy in ‘the unity of the living symbol’,[[23]](#footnote-23) which supposes an equation between the text or textual element and a symbolic level. The second enemy, less discussed in this book, is that concrete realism that denies the multiple levels of allegorical reading.[[24]](#footnote-24) The enemy is also within allegory, as the symbolic reading is close to those kinds of allegory that imply an equation between one level and another. As Jameson puts it: ‘The two-level system is the mark of bad allegory’.[[25]](#footnote-25) An example would be the readings of Orwell’s *1984* as ‘really’ about the Soviet Union or ‘totalitarianism’, equating the world of the text with one referent, something implied, I think, by Orwell’s own text. For Jameson ‘the ideology of the symbol [is equivalent] to the language of dualistic or two-level, point-to-point allegories, as distinguished from the multileveled systems we are about to confront’.[[26]](#footnote-26) Hence the insistence on the four levels of allegory, as against two or three, and the insistence on the transversal relations between these levels. It is a matter of structure and event, or event in structure or structure as event. In that sense – and again echoes of Althusser might be detected – we have a mode of reading that tracks and reveals the form of these levels and how particular texts encode moments of crisis in trying to renovate or explicate these levels.

If this is the complexity of the text, in its four levels, we also have different further possible allegorical levels. In addition to the largely canonical texts discussed in *Allegory and Ideology* we have the allegorical reading of those texts that reveals their allegorical structure. What this then reveals is the ways these texts engage and transform the allegorical social forms we live with and their points of crisis – allegory as social structure. Text, reading, and social form, all, we might hazard, operate in the mode of allegory. Many of Jameson’s chosen texts in this book, if not all, are texts of crisis. It is in the moment of crisis that the four levels being visible, structure and history start to appear in the moment of their rending, and the necessity for an allegorical reading becomes evident.

The role of the critic as reader is the mapping of ‘structure and interpretation’, which find their conditions in:

a differentiation of the various senses and other phenomenological levels of ‘experience’ and a mobile and seemingly random yet properly transversal play of attention back and forth, which seems to dwell in turn and without any particular order on point-to-point relations between individual strands.[[27]](#footnote-27)

This is specifically with reference to Dante, but I think it can stand for something like the mode of attention generally required to read allegorically, in Jameson’s sense. This is how Jameson reads, and, by implication, both how we should read Jameson and how we should read in general. It bears some resemblance to the ‘free-floating attention’ of the psychoanalyst who should, if skilled enough, be able to move through the levels of the story the analysand tells, their suffering, use psychoanalytic concepts to ‘read’ this experience, but also be aware of how those concepts themselves can become bad allegory. A good analyst is not one who declares ‘say Oedipus!’, which is why, I think, Deleuze and Guattari exaggerate the violence of Melanie Klein’s mode of analysis.[[28]](#footnote-28) A good analyst is able to feel their own concepts come under pressure, the possibilities of their own counter-transference, and to offer interpretive possibilities that develop relations.

The texts of modernity, by which Jameson means many of the texts subjected to reading in *Allegory and Ideology*, are ‘precious fever charts, of a disease as yet unidentifiable (let alone curable)’.[[29]](#footnote-29) This is a strange and problematic concession of weakness, even if metaphoric. Psychoanalysis and medicine might seem to place us in the moral domain of the individual soul, now translated into psyche and soma. This would seem to exclude the masses, a problem psychoanalysis stumbled over, while in medicine the vital field of public health and epidemiology is split from the ‘moral’ relation of doctor and patient. These metaphors for reading indicate the difficulty – reading seems to be a solitary and singular operation between us and the text. This is also true for the critic who, as Deleuze noted, repeats the clinical gaze.[[30]](#footnote-30) The text enters the consulting room and is diagnosed and cured or, as Jameson suggests, used for its indicative or curative properties. The risk is that the allegorical reading will become a moral reading.[[31]](#footnote-31) The treatment of reading as a moral matter is at the heart of that collective endeavour that is literary criticism. While collective, the aim is the formation of individual taste and discrimination and this is on the model of the priestly and theocratic.[[32]](#footnote-32) Jameson’s explicit turn to the theological model of allegory is homeopathically designed to counter such a triumph of the moral and the sacred in literary criticism.

Certainly, however, the practice and experience of collective reading appears to have declined. Think of Dickens’ *Our Mutual Friend* (1864) and the orphan child Sloppy who reads the newspaper to his ward Mrs Higden. She states ‘you mightn’t think it, but Sloppy is a beautiful reader of a newspaper. He do the Police in different voices.’[[33]](#footnote-33) T. S. Eliot would consider ‘He do the Police in different voices’ as a title for what became ‘The Waste Land’, lending a modernist recoding to this practice of reading aloud. One is also reminded of Walter Benjamin’s essay ‘The Story Teller’, and its reflections on the shift away from oral tale telling.[[34]](#footnote-34) The reading of newspapers and radical pamphlets aloud to illiterate workers was a staple of the communities that formed the English working class, as E. P. Thompson has detailed.[[35]](#footnote-35) These are collective practices of reading or listening unlike, for example, the current audio book, which remains a largely individual relation of listening symbolised by the use of headphones. Elements of this collective reading persist in the reading group or, technologically mediated, in online forums and forms, which often turn on collective practices of interpretation and, of course, misinterpretation.

All this is not to simply romanticise past modes, nor necessarily to share the Benjaminian confidence, inspired by Brecht, that cinema or other technological forms might reinvent new modes of collective expression for the masses (all this given a more muted form in the work of Marshall McLuhan).[[36]](#footnote-36) It is to note the problem of the collective and its ‘pressure’ emerging within the act of reading and its institutional mediation. In literary criticism the sign of this difficulty, but not its resolution, was found in reader-response criticism. While largely ‘liberal’ in orientation, responding, in part, to the extension and ‘massification’ of education in the 1960s and 1970s, this current was also responding to the newly radicalised reading publics of that moment. This was a particular ‘pressure’ of population or the masses. Today, we could argue that this pressure of the uneven experience of massification in literary education is felt in the turn to digital humanities and online teaching. These technological modes of mediation of collective experience in a largely individualised form are predicated on ‘skills’ and the appeal of science and technology as the ‘real’ material of our world.

The collective not only traces a negative pressure on the act of reading but more definitely within texts themselves. In that sense Eliot’s integration of the oral within the text of ‘The Waste Land’ is both sign of loss and gain: loss of collective reading or enunciation, gain of the integration of voices within the text. Modernist collage is the practice of the collective in the text despite or perhaps because of the well-known ‘fear of the masses’ present in modernism and linked to the imperial moment.[[37]](#footnote-37) This is evident in Conrad, and we should add in other writing of that moment, with H. P. Lovecraft’s ‘pulp’ weird fictions demonstrating the anxiety provoked by the racialised ‘mass’ as monstrous.[[38]](#footnote-38) Modernist collage, and parallel gestures, at once integrate the masses but also control or try to control them within or through the ‘gaze’ of the modernist. This is something like a version of the thesis of Bakhtin on carnival and carnivalesque, in which the ‘living’ experience of carnival as social practice is translated into the carnivalesque of voices within Rabelais and later the novel.[[39]](#footnote-39) The result, problematically, is a seemingly endless series of debates as to whether such moments are liberation or confinement, the carnival being the model of temporary transgression and restored order.[[40]](#footnote-40) Similarly, as I have suggested, is modernist integration of the oral and the collective to be understood as neutralisation or politicisation? It would be possible, schematically it is true, to read modernism itself as expression of these two ‘lines’, a right and left modernism, each trying to tear itself from the other.

I want, however, to displace this debate and return to the tensions of allegory in terms of the tensions of the masses as makers and made, producers and produced, within the allegorical levels themselves. I also want to return to the problem of ‘bad’ allegory, the point-to-point allegory, for which Jameson’s example is Albert Camus’s *The Plague* as allegory of the French resistance against Nazi occupation or more broadly for the ‘human condition’. Jameson regards the novel as a lapse from ‘found freshness … into sheer moralising’.[[41]](#footnote-41) The tension that had sustained Camus’s previous work, between the moment of happiness and the absurd, has here slackened. This is dual allegory with a vengeance. The temptation is given from the start, with the quotation from Daniel Defoe announcing ‘It as reasonable to represent one kind of imprisonment by another, as it is to represent anything that really exists by that which exists not.’[[42]](#footnote-42) The potential movement implied by this statement is, however, limited. Tony Judt’s afterword to the Penguin English translation is telling in this regard, saving the novel from the limitation of being about Nazi occupation and French resistance by claiming it is targeted at general ‘dogma’ or ‘compliance’.[[43]](#footnote-43) The allegorical reading is expanded but only to one other level, the human condition, and that in the most loose of terms.

Instead, I want to suggest that *The Plague* is perhaps more successful as what Jameson calls ‘a realistic representation’ of plague infection in Oran.[[44]](#footnote-44) In this sense we could read it non-allegorically as a book about the plague, about disease, quarantine, struggles between duty and fear, profiteering and heroism.[[45]](#footnote-45) As Jameson notes it is political as it concerns the collective, although largely with the exception of the Arab population as anything significant.[[46]](#footnote-46) The politics turn not so much on political as virological resistance, the politics of plague and quarantine that make fleeting appearances in Foucault’s readings of madness and the prison.[[47]](#footnote-47) This is the possibility of a biopolitical reading of Camus, which would also include the biopolitics of his exclusions. In Foucault’s words, while leprosy involves ‘separation’ and the project of exclusion, the plague involves ‘segmentations’ and the problem of order.[[48]](#footnote-48) Camus’s *The Plague* would be a novel of this problem of order in relation to the disorder of the masses, more particularly within the urban, as Oran becomes city as prison.

Dr Rieux, the narrator of *The Plague*, announces ‘But when an abstraction starts to kill you, you have to set to work on it.’[[49]](#footnote-49) Certainly, the novel displays that dislike and distrust for abstractions that runs through Camus’s thought and fiction. This is also true of the taste for the ‘concrete’ in the phenomenological tradition, which, as Adorno pointed out, can often take a deeply abstract form.[[50]](#footnote-50) The novel aims at abstractions as something deadly, but then the presence of the plague can also attract another sense of the concrete. This is the form we have called the biopolitical and the ‘work on’ the abstractions are practical in orientation, with particular credit being given to the daily record-keeping and organisation by the civil servant Grand. The form of the plague and the responses to them in the novel involve material organisation and planning. Such materialities seem to defy or complicate the distinction Camus operates between the concrete and the abstract. They demonstrate that Camus’s concept of the concrete is highly abstract and another concrete can be sought in grasping these ‘segmentations’ and organisations. In this case, the biopolitical might give another potential reading of the abstract as ‘diagram’ that takes concrete form in the quarantine, regulation and ordering of the city space by the civic and other authorities.

Of course, we have here the risk of another grand one-to-one allegory, with Camus’s novel becoming an allegory of the disciplinary project of modernity.[[51]](#footnote-51) This would be the case if we simply tried instantiate the biopolitical level as singular. That is to say, biopolitics as the fundamental explanatory schema and totalising understanding of modernity. It is a risk run by Foucault and, even more so, by Giorgio Agamben.[[52]](#footnote-52) Yet, reading Camus as biopolitical suggests the multiplicity of the biopolitical, which cuts across Camus’s text and also, as we will see, Camus’s own ideological commitments as they structure his texts. It is not a matter of replacing the Nazi occupation or the human condition with biopolitics, but instead unfolding biopolitics as this particular moment of disease and responses to the measures for the individual and the collective. This is a complex situation within the novel. Quarantine is not to be taken as some negative imposition on the vital forces of the masses, with the plague as ‘collective festival’ opposed to ‘strict divisions’.[[53]](#footnote-53) This vision, courted by Foucault, perhaps another instance of what Carlo Ginzburg calls his ‘black populism’,[[54]](#footnote-54) needs to be resisted. In fact, in the heroism of organising and sustaining the quarantine as a necessary act we see something of the dissolution of this political myth of the anarchic masses opposed to segmentation and discipline, which recurs even within the sobriety of Foucault’s texts. The masses align as a collective, not simply with ‘resistance’ to quarantine and its regulations but as the need to make these survivable for the masses. It is a matter of collective life and death refracted through Camus’s range of characters.

The biopolitical reading of Camus, which I sketch here as a possibility, would be a realism that engaged with the text contrary to the allegory of the resistance or of the human condition. It would make it a more practical, if not prosaic text. Such a treatment would allow us to question Camus’s own ‘Mediterraneanism’, an ideological form that celebrates the uniqueness of Mediterranean space and ‘nature’ at the expense of political understanding of the violent exclusions that structure this space that ‘mediates’ East and West.[[55]](#footnote-55) The setting in mercantile Oran and the impositions of the plague quarantine block the celebration of sun and sea that translate the Mediterranean into a numinous reality (as we see in *The Outsider*).[[56]](#footnote-56) On the contrary Oran, a city Camus disliked, is presented as hot, dusty and smelling of seaweed.[[57]](#footnote-57) The denial of this ideological form, or its torsion, suggests how a biopolitical realism might work against this ideological moment. Certainly, the text does not particularly engage with its own exclusions, but traces of another biopolitics are possible.

The realism we are proposing is not the collapse of reality and symbol that Jameson finds in Auerbach’s reading of Dante, which plays a Thomist realism against allegory. That would be realism of the one-to-one, fuses reality with the religious in a moment of enchantment. This biopolitical realism denies such a fusion. It would move beyond the numinous as the reality of realism, including that Mediterranean ‘numinous’ that preoccupies Camus. Not so much the occupation and the human condition, but the quarantine forms of biopolitical power, the engagement with the nonhuman virus mediated through spatial forms of power, the possibilities and limits of collective responses to those forms, and the ideological forms of collective expression. This would be a retooling of Camus’s text, which remains problematically sententious, and also of biopolitics, which remains within a discourse of modernity that is in denial of the fundamental connection with capitalist modernity.[[58]](#footnote-58)

The problem of realism and Jameson’s sensitivity to a theology of the material is valuable, especially at a moment in which the material is valorised as some kind of automatic resistance to transcendence and the religious. Nothing could be further from the truth. We can hazard that what Jameson is suggesting is that realism does not simply collapse all the levels into one – ‘reality’ – but that it embeds all the levels into ‘reality’, which itself becomes the problem. This would be something like Lukács’s distinction between naturalism, which reproduces and therefore renders reality ideologically, and realism, which can create an internal critical fracture in ‘reality’ and envisage a totality.[[59]](#footnote-59) In the case of Camus, we can see how so religious formulations can take secular forms, in that case the Mediterranean ideology. We can also see a biopolitical realism of the nonhuman that resists such theological or mystical moments of ‘numinous’ realism.

More widely, we might refer to the dominance of the thinking of Heidegger in the interpretation of the key texts of modernity, a point made by Jameson.[[60]](#footnote-60) A staging remains to be made of the conflict between Heidegger’s four-fold (gods, mortals, sky, earth) and Jameson’s four levels of allegory. The ‘sacred’ reading of texts proceeds in the absence of allegory, precisely by a series of theological or mystical fusions of word and reality. In the case of Heidegger, his own gathering of simulacral and mystical collectives would stand as a central example of the false appearance of the masses. This mystical naturalism of the masses translates the most speculative and metaphysical forms into the most brutally banal appearances – Germany, ‘the land of the middle’, the whole ‘peasant ideology’, in the most negative sense.[[61]](#footnote-61) Heidegger abolishes history in the name of historicity and is the inversion of that Marxist interest in the peasantry that we noted at the beginning of this essay. Jameson’s text seems to me to offer some tools for the dismantling of the Heideggerean naturalist mysticism of the mass and of language, while not always being clear about this possibility.[[62]](#footnote-62)

Underlying these issues is the threat of the loss of the four levels and the arising of strict correspondence of the kind X=Y, or X really means Y. This is a problem I have already raised with dystopian fiction; what Y is X dystopian text an allegory of or how does X dystopian text compare to the Y of the present? Such would be bad allegory. In a sense, Jameson’s long concern has been with trying to render allegorical texts, thinking of his work on science fiction,[[63]](#footnote-63) away from this kind of ‘bad’ allegory and towards the complexity of levels he details here. We could add that this is obviously a political matter and relates to the masses, which are squeezed out or constrained by one-to-one allegorical structures, thinking of the mysterious place of the ‘proles’ in *1984*, source of both hope and utter despair.[[64]](#footnote-64) The strange presence and absence of the ‘proles’ rendering *1984*, as many critics have noted, a seemingly middle-class affair. In terms of politics we should add that Jameson has always been concerned with resisting the depoliticising effects of moral and ethical readings that find their structure in the opposition good / bad.[[65]](#footnote-65) ‘Bad’ allegory is not something moral, but the disabling of transversal readings between levels, precisely the kind of oscillation we saw in the Bakhtinian carnival, which can only swing between subversion and containment.

On Jameson’s own analysis of postmodern texts operating between the minimal and the maximal it would seem surely obvious that this is a maximal text. In fact, this productive excess runs through Jameson’s work here and elsewhere. One thing Jameson certainly takes from Brecht is his productivism and it is this that perhaps makes Jameson a somewhat unusual Western Marxist. Certainly, the very justification for Marxist reading is itself cast in terms of a maximum of productivity:

the advantage of a Marxist criticism, far from being ‘reductive,’ lay in the fact that it includes more, it expands the phenomenon of the text to greater and more multiple dimensions of both reference and signification, making of the literary work an act in history and time as well as an inert and static objective structure.[[66]](#footnote-66)

The four levels of allegory are the drivers of this production, proliferation and complexity. The blending and clashing of the four levels in the multidimensional space of the text, to paraphrase Barthes,[[67]](#footnote-67) result in this productive structural tension that expands the text.

While this certainly involves all the productive forces, something Jameson has been insistent upon against the nervousness of many Western Marxists with the destructive results of those forces, it also involves the masses. The masses gain their organisation and coherence through these forces, they do not stand outside the forms of capital nor are they simply an internal rupture. That said, again as in Mao, the relations of production and their relation to the masses making history are centrally problems that remain before us as well as embedded in singular texts. In that sense part of Jameson’s work has been exposing hermetic and singular texts, perhaps especially those of high modernism, but also those like the works of Raymond Chandler, which start to look more like those of high modernism, to the ‘pressure’ of the masses as well as the mutations of the capitalist mode of production.

The utopian, as usual with Jameson, is correlated with the desire and the expression of the collective. In this study the utopian makes relatively few appearances, which is strangely similar to the few direct appearances of the masses. I want to suggest that this is correlated and the pressure of the masses I have traced on Jameson’s book is also a pressure of the utopian. What form does that pressure take? I want to conclude with one strange and to me moving and comic moment of the intrusion of the masses on to the stage of history and the pressure of the utopian. This occurs in a bracketed statement by Jameson in the chapter on Dante. Jameson is discussing the fate of the sinners in Canto X of *The Inferno*, which are in the sixth circle of hell, that of the heretics; specifically, in this Canto, the Epicureans, who believed the soul died with the body and are punished by being eternally locked in red hot coffins. Also, while they have sight of the future they do not know the present. We could say, using Jameson’s terminology, this is a punishment of the impossibility of cognitive mapping or traversing the levels of time. Eventually they will be locked in the coffin and have no sight at all. In this way, they are deprived on the possibility of mapping continuous time, which comes to finite humans according to Jameson through ancestor worship or concepts of immortality. This is Jameson’s comment, aside, or addition: ‘There must have been much celebration in ancient Egypt on that memorable day on which immortality was extended to the dead of the common people!’.[[68]](#footnote-68)

While ‘extended’ suggests a passivity, we might recall Rancière’s notion of the radically disruptive inclusion of the ‘part of no-part’,[[69]](#footnote-69) or Marx’s insistence on the negativity of the proletariat as the condition of its redemption of the whole of society. We could also bring together Benjamin’s anxiety that even the dead would not be safe from fascism, which was proved correct,[[70]](#footnote-70) and his interest in the notion of apokatastasis, generally attributed to Origen, that all shall be saved.[[71]](#footnote-71) This includes Satan, who shall be saved last. This moment in Jameson’s text, my favourite line in the book, suggests to me a claim to immortality on behalf of the masses that can, as Benjamin agreed, be realised on earth. In her book *Second-Hand Time* on the collapse of the Soviet Union Svetlana Alexievich interviews many witnesses, including those workers or now retired workers who recall they used to name streets after workers. While attentive to all the crimes of that social formation these moments themselves stand out as a certain claim to immortality of the masses now being erased in new ‘capitalist’ re-namings. I see a short-cut or jump between these two moments and also how this strange textual monument to allegory traces the utopian desire of the common people to immortality. The masses not only enter history, they also enter immortality.

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