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Is the Cheese Meaningless? The Distension of Dialectics in Jameson's *The Antinomies of Realism*

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It is strange to see Jameson jumping on the affect theory bandwagon in his recent book, *The Antinomies of Realism*, in which he offers a wide-ranging discussion of realism, defined as a dialectic between storytelling and affect. Although these poles are considered to be "the two chronological end points of realism" (10), they are said to operate simultaneously within the text itself and it seems that they should not be confused with the activity of the writer and that of the reader. Rather, they are respectively aligned with *récit* vs description, telling vs showing, linear time vs the perpetual present, destiny vs existential being, determinism vs contingency, closed vs open forms, arias vs chromaticism, meaning vs meaninglessness ("unassimilable to meaning" [37]), and named things vs namelessness and a general "resistance to language" (31). And, leading the list, as the general binary under which these rather classical Western antinomies are subsumed, is the polarity of named emotion vs affect. Jameson states that he follows Rei Terada in differentiating emotions from affects in that the former are defined as conscious states and the latter as bodily sensations; "language is here opposed to the body" (32).1 The role of language and meaning in these various binaries may thus help explain the recourse to the central antinomy of emotion vs affect as a theoretical vehicle in the discussion of realism, as this pair seems to parallel the linguistic/anti-linguistic schema set out in some of the other binaries.

The idea of a resistance to language, common to one pole of each of these binaries, may help explain the presence of affect in this theory of realism, but does not seem to justify it. In this reduction of a wide series of literary/philosophical elements to a polarity of emotion vs affect, we witness the danger of a distended dialectics, an expansion and proliferation of dualisms, a slippage between various somewhat similar oppositions which are then lined up under the heading of a rather arbitrary antinomy. For what seems at times to get lost in this theorization is realism itself, or the specificity of realism. It is perhaps true, even convincing, that realism exists as an aesthetic product at the crossroads of telling and showing, plot and description, destiny and existence, causality and contingent singularities. But does "affect" really summarize the latter terms of each of these dualities? In this theorization, affect seems to function as a placeholder for all possible terms on the existential/phenomenological side of the equation. Even more oddly, the determinist/linguistic side reduces to named emotion, although this element is mentioned less often. As a placeholder, the concept of affect necessarily lacks precision. The notion of affect is far from being synonymous with namelessness, which has taken many aesthetic forms throughout history (and well before the mid nineteenth century, such as in the theory of the sublime), and it is unclear why the appeal to affect here is warranted. Similarly, one need not have recourse to the idea of affect to appreciate synesthesia and the importance of the senses, and especially that of smell, in mid to late nineteenth-century literature, including but not limited to realist literature ("Odor…seems everywhere, from Baudelaire to Proust, to be a privileged vehicle for isolating affect and identifying it for a variety of dynamics…" [35]), and it is unclear what

this concept brings to the discussion of smell. If affects are defined as "bodily feelings" (32), smell certainly may be seen to fall into that category, but this categorization, in the context of this discussion, does not bring us closer to understanding the olfactory experience and its role in aesthetics. Nor is the concept of affect necessary or especially helpful when focusing upon the eternal present, existence, intensity, singularity, experience or contingency (36-37), all recurrent concepts in nineteenth and twentieth-century aesthetics, which lose some of their specificity and force when lumped under the (rather arbitrary) heading of affect. One of the book's longer examples of the functioning of affect revolves around music and especially Wagner's chromaticism (38-41)—which is, let it be said in passing, an aesthetic form quite far from realism; chromaticism, like affect, waxes and wanes in intensity and nuance, and "would seem the most essential, but also the most obvious, way of characterizing everything that is proteiform, metamorphic, shimmering and changeable-ephemeral about affect itself…" (40). These are fine descriptions of Wagner's music in itself, but the concept of affect neither helps explain chromaticism nor is explained by it. Affect as a theoretical vehicle in the discussion of realism seems to lack specific explanatory force; it may thus be helpful here to apply the principle of Ockham's razor.

Jameson's thesis is also historical: around the 1840s, affect began to emerge in creative production, entering as a force of liberation from *récit* and the determinism of named emotions. He describes the "multiplicity of ways this new element can pervade nineteenth-century realism and open up its narratives" (35). Henceforth, affect and narrative will intermingle in a tense dialectic, giving rise to realism. Before this time, emotions and sensations, and other described details, function in literature as signs: "In Balzac everything that looks like a physical sensation—a musty smell, a rancid taste, a greasy fabric—always means something, it is a sign or allegory of the moral or social status of a given character…" (33). As an example, Jameson cites the description of the "stuffy, mouldy, rancid" smell of the Vauquier salon in the beginning of *Le père Goriot*, which "is not really a sensation, it is already a meaning, an allegory" (33), a sign referring to the qualities of the people who inhabit the salon. On the other hand, like the descriptive details evoked in Barthes' "L'Effet de réel," affects have no signifying value, no narrative function, and "cannot be present in the regime of the *récit*" (35). Jameson refuses Barthes' reincorporation of such literary "non-meaningful, non-symbolic objects" into the realm of signification and semiotics by making them signs of realism itself, and thus maintains a strict duality between allegory and the body, between meaning and affect. In this context, "affect" is a rather weighty word with a certain baggage, making it unwieldy when used to refer to a variation of the reality effect, for many descriptive details have little to do with the "bodily feelings" which are said to define affect. Again, smells may be said to approach such feelings, but it is difficult to see how for example the barometer in the Aubain house in "Un coeur simple," cited by Barthes at the beginning of his famous essay as a primary example of a narratively insignificant detail, should be considered a bodily feeling.[2] Perhaps the apparently meaningless presence of such an object is related to raw, contingent existence which in turn evokes the phenomenological experience of existence, an experience which is necessarily embodied and therefore, by a series of slippages, brings us to bodily feelings. But this logic is quite slippery and the *raison d'être* of affect in the argument is unclear as it does not help us to grasp the particularity of the realistic detail.

Beyond the question of the terminology of affect, however, the historical argument is somewhat overstated, for it posits an opposition where in many ways there should be seen a continuity and an evolution. Against Balzac's overdetermined, allegorical details, Jameson contrasts Baudelaire's, Flaubert's and Zola's indeterminable objects, "unassimilable to

meaning." After discussing the mustiness of the Vauquier salon and its signposting of the moral and social qualities of the characters, Jameson turns to Baudelaire's mustiness:

Dans une maison déserte quelque armoire

Pleine de l'âcre odeur des temps, poudreuse et noire…

("Le Flacon")

As the first literary example given of "this new element" (35), this passage deserves some attention. Jameson states that "the musty smell of time drifts in indeterminable synesthesia across the grimy tactility of the armoire. These unnamable sensations have become autonomous […] they no longer mean anything: states of the world, they simply exist" (34). When taken out of context, things can indeed seem like autonomous singularities; but nothing in "Le Flacon" justifies this interpretation of the autonomy of sensation. To show this it is necessary to put Baudelaire's mustiness back in its context:

Il est de forts parfums pour qui toute matière

Est poreuse. On dirait qu'ils pénètrent le verre.

En ouvrant un coffret venu de l'Orient

Dont la serrure grince et rechigne en criant,

Ou dans une maison déserte quelque armoire

Pleine de l'âcre odeur des temps, poudreuse et noire,

Parfois on trouve un vieux flacon qui se souvient,

D'où jaillit toute vive une âme qui revient.

(lines 1-8)

Through metonymy, the mustiness of the armoire is linked to the perfumes that penetrate glass and to the memory/soul contained within the old flask. The armoire is related to the Oriental chest and the flask; in each case, a container is opened and a smell or a memory is released. Just as the soul is held within the flask, the flask is held within the armoire or the chest. The poem goes on to evoke the thoughts/memories/vertiginous feelings which escape, fly and disturb the subject, as rotting Lazarus and a rancid love awaken from the grave; thus, after the poet's own death, he (and presumably his poems) will be like an old discarded flask, containing memory/perfume/poison. The mustiness of the armoire is thus not autonomous; it participates in a complex metonymic web of smells and memories. Nor is this smell especially nameless: although "âcre," "poudreuse et noire" are imprecise, just as are the other epithets attached to the odors and memories in the poem, these words and the poem itself constitute an attempt at naming a complex psychological reality.

As for the claim that these sensations "no longer mean anything," it simply does not do justice to the poem. It may be difficult to pinpoint what exactly the sensations mean, but they are not meaningless, autonomous singularities. Far from creating a rupture with signifying, Baudelaire's objects and sensations are used to bring forth new means of signifying through metonymic and synesthetic correspondences. Baudelaire would quite disagree with the statement, "it is allegory and the body which repel one another and fail to mix" (37), for Baudelaire himself conceived of his poetic method as a continuation of the long poetic tradition of allegory and long spiritual tradition of *correspondances*, modernized and applied to the romantic embodied subject.[3] Baudelaire did not clearly distinguish between allegory, symbol, analogy, and correspondence; what is certain is that his sensations are not singularities but participate in such signifying dualities, or rather metonymic chains. A citation from *Les Paradis artificiels* (1860) suffices to show that Baudelaire's relationship with allegory is strong and complex:

Nous noterons en passant que l'allégorie, ce genre si *spirituel*, que les peintres maladroits nous ont accoutumés à mépriser, mais qui est vraiment l'une des formes primitives et les plus naturelles de la poésie, reprend sa domination légitime dans l'intelligence illuminée par l'ivresse.[4]

Here, allegory and the body are explicitly joined in drunkenness, *ivresse*. Baudelaire seeks significant relations between the sensory and the intangible, attempts to portray the ideal within the real, and his poetics of *correspondances* may thus be seen as an evolution out of, and not a break from, Balzac's more direct and societal allegorizing. Baudelaire's allegorizing can even at times be more classical than Balzac's, such as in "Le Cygne." Baudelaire was a great reader of Balzac, and Balzac himself mentions synesthesia several times. One cannot separate allegory and synesthesia, or allegory and the body, in Baudelaire, for their mixture produces his poetics of *correspondances*.[5]

Thus there is more continuity than rupture between Balzac and Baudelaire. But there are differences, of course, and Jameson is correct in identifying the appearance of something new in the mid nineteenth century, toward the beginning of modernism, something which he unhappily terms affect. Baudelaire modernizes the tradition of allegory; this is here understood in the sense in which he defines modernity ("La modernité, c'est le fugitif, le transitoire, le contingent…").[6] Among the list of terms Jameson associates with affect—namelessness, meaninglessness, synesthesia, eternal present, existence, intensity, singularity, experience, contingency—the last of these seem in our opinion most to describe "this new element." Here the risks of proliferating dialectics and the collapsing of non-synonymous terms become clear: while singularity and meaninglessness are not operative as new elements, as we have seen, contingency is. Indeed, to generalize, post-1850 aesthetics, both realist and symbolist, may be understood partly as the fusion of contingency and meaning, resulting in an abundance, perhaps an overabundance, of contiguous signifiers and related non-necessary signs, stretching older aesthetic forms toward abstraction. This is true of Wagner's chomaticism, impressionist dabs of paint, symbolist synesthesia and realist description. The story of these developments can be told without recourse to the notion of affect, which needless to say should not be confused with contingency.

This brings us back to Jameson and realism. Jameson continues to insist upon the idea of meaninglessness in Zola's abundant descriptive lists; in referring to the copious description of the cheeses in the shop in *Le Ventre de Paris*, he speaks of "their veritable liberation from meaning in all their excess" (62). The pungent cheese passage indeed shows a "delirious

multiplicity" (62), but the cheeses are far from being meaningless or "autonomous" (59). For what does it mean when it is said that an element of a literary work is meaningless? Can it be true that multiplicity or excess leads to meaninglessness? Or that the moment something exists in the bodily realm, it does not signify? These are quite strong claims which would imply a very limited conception of meaning as belonging only to something non-embodied which exists in a reasonable quantity. We should rather take a more supple view of meaning, in the optimistic theoretical perspective that there is no element of a text that is "meaningless," by the very virtue of it existing in a composed and authored text. Again, we may not be able to ascertain the meaning(s) definitively or simply, but nothing justifies the pessimistic view, and it is our job as textual analysts humbly to make the attempt and not flee the task by invoking a postmodern celebration of delirious meaninglessness.

Here, saying that the cheeses are liberated from meaning seems to say that Zola's objects do not signify in the same determinate way as Balzac's. But not signifying like Balzac's objects is different from not signifying altogether. As we have seen with Baudelaire, proliferation of variation, invitation to contingency, abundance of contiguous and non-necessary signifiers, hyperbole of sensation, are part of modern aesthetics, here taking the form of realist description. They may function here as a commentary or reflection on the role of facts and lists in a newly statistical age, or on the newly expanding commodification of *produits de terroir* provoking a loss of particular provincial origins and a nausea of oversaturation. The list of cheeses may also serve a structural function in the context of the novel, creating a moment of suspense as the interruption in the gossip between the shopkeepers is prolonged excessively. Certainly the many metaphors within the passage, especially those relating to rot, sickness and wounds, bring it a richly layered symbolism; and above all, the framing of the list of stinking cheeses within a conversation about stinking moral judgments upon the stinking acts of others carries an allegorical meaning that is not very far afield from Balzac's use of clearly determined objects to depict character traits. Jameson clearly recognizes and amply describes this allegorical element but he seems frustrated to see Zola add "quite unnecessarily" that it seemed as though it was the conversation which smelled so awful (64). Necessary or not, this addition exists in the text and conveys a part of the meaning of the passage; this seems to be frustrating to Jameson as he describes the "semi-autonomous symphony" of the cheeses, which "assert their individuality" (63), as though they were liberating themselves from plot and thus from meaning. But copious presentation, excessive multiplicity of description in itself, does not translate into "autonomy" from the other elements of a text, especially when the interdependence between textual elements is emphasized by the author in such an interpretive commentary. This addition seems to highlight the similarity and not the rupture with Balzac's methods of creating meaning (the allegorical factor would not be difficult to accept if the multiplicity of the long descriptive passage were replaced by a simple "le fromage puait"). This is where Jameson writes: "But what is also crucial here is not so much the allegorical function of the cheeses as their veritable liberation from meaning in all their excess, so that they come to know their own temporality, in which even the silences of the body play their role" (64). It is strange to see Jameson admit an allegorical function of the cheeses and still assert that they are liberated from meaning (we will not attempt to understand how cheese can know its own temporality or which body is intended here). In brief, it is difficult to ground the claim that the cheese is meaningless.

The issue of meaningless elements, so central to Jameson's argument about post-1850 aesthetics, makes one wonder what really is at stake here, if there is a hidden interest in such "autonomy" from signifying structures. Jameson writes, "the literary representation of

affect… has as its function to replace the opposition of mind and body" (73); but it is a common contradiction in postmodern thinking to defend a monism of mind and body, while simultaneously banishing the mind (alongside meaning) and so focusing on the body that the dualism necessarily returns.7 Jameson has formulations like "[these elements] must not be allowed to become symbolic…" (65). What does the "autonomous unfolding of sense data" (59) really mean? It is assumed that the sensations are autonomous from meaning; but again, there is no foundation for the claim that any element of a text is meaningless. It would be impossible to analyze in this short space the reasons for the postmodern fear of mind and meaning, but one may say that Jameson's concept of affect comes down to another variation on the postmodern "unassimilable," another trace, another inexpressible, another other, what Lyotard called "l'inaccordable" and others have called by a host of other names.8 This is a late romantic position, critical of reason, mind and language as it is feared that they will dissect/murder, reduce or reify, a perspective that seeks a return to nature in the form of namelessness, pure existence and the "perpetual present"—showing well that we are (unfortunately) still in the romantic age.

1.Rei Terada, *Feeling in Theory: Emotion After the "Death of the Subject"* (Cambridge: Harvard, 2001).
2.Roland Barthes "L'Effet de réel," *Communications* 11:11 (1968), 84.
3.See Patrick Labarthe, *Baudelaire et la tradition de l'allégorie* (Geneva: Droz, 1999). Notice the direct reference in "Le Flacon" to the possibly contemporaneous sonnet, "Correspondances," Baudelaire's synesthetic *ars poetica*, whose third stanza begins: "Il est des parfums frais comme des chairs d'enfants…."
4.Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Claude Pichois (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), 1:430.
5.When Jameson claims later on that in Flaubert, "Balzacian allegory [transformed] into the bodily contingency of affect," he is closer to the truth, although the notion of affect continues to confuse more than aid.
6.Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Claude Pichois (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), 2:695.
7.A truly monist view, such as a Buddhist view based in the experience of meditation, would disagree with the following: the "'perpetual present' is better characterized as a 'reduction to the body,' inasmuch as the body is all that remains in any tendential reduction of experience to the present as such" (28).
8.Jean-François Lyotard, *L'Inhumain: Causeries sur le temps* (Paris: Galilée, 1988), 12.