

(121). As the essays in *Walker Percy's Feminine Characters* show, not even a writer like Walker Percy who is keenly aware of these traditions and of the forces of modernization necessarily overcomes them in his work.

Fredric Jameson

The Seeds of Time

New York: Columbia UP, 1994. Pp. xviii + 215. \$22.95

Reviewed by Jerry A. Varsava

Fredric Jameson presented the 1991 Wellek Library Lectures in Critical Theory at the University of California, Irvine, and it is these three lectures that *The Seeds of Time* brings together. Certainly, students of literary theory and postmodernity require no introduction to Jameson, who has established himself over the last twenty-five years as the preeminent Marxist critic in the United States through the publication of such widely influential books as *The Political Unconscious* (1981) and *Postmodernism; Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), not to mention a myriad of essays, the most important of which are collected in the two volumes of *The Ideologies of Theory* (1988).

The essays of this collection manifest many of the features of Jameson's other scholarship, particularly that of the Eighties and Nineties. Extraordinary erudition, catholicity of reference, (directed) eclecticism, suggestive analogies—all of these support an insistent claim that we must strive and struggle to conceptualize an alternative to late capitalism. The ambit of the first chapter, "The Antinomies of Postmodernity," is the broadest, and this essay will presumably have the greatest appeal. The second, "Utopia, Modernism, and Death," attempts, against the historical odds, it seems to me, to demonstrate the contemporary relevance of *Chevengur*, a neglected novel written by the Russian poet Andrei Platonov in the late twenties that depicts the formation and ultimate destruction of a peasant utopia at the hands of "counter-revolutionary bandits" (82). The third essay, "The Constraints of Postmodernism," examines postmodern style, particularly with regard to architecture.

As Jameson sets out in his introduction, his primary concerns here remain, as elsewhere, a critique of capitalism and the postulation of a postcapitalist world. However, presumably in light of the dissolution of the Soviet empire, Jameson is altogether more tentative in these essays than in earlier works such as *The Political Unconscious*. What Jameson advances in *The Seeds of Time* is a chastened, subdued Marxism, one troubled by doubt, if not outright despair. "It seems to be easier for us today," he laments, "to imagine the thoroughgoing deterioration of the earth and of nature than the breakdown of late capitalism; perhaps that is due to some weakness in our imaginations" (xii).

For Jameson, the postmodern world is not simply incapable of utopian vision but is indeed outright “anti-utopian.” Consequently, what might be construed as (locally, and “weakly”) utopian from, say, a liberal point of view—for example, the successful struggle for rights and entitlements by particular micropolitical groups—has scant socially or politically ameliorative value for him because such changes occur within a fundamentally “bad” ideological regime, that is, “capitalism.” Or, as he explicitly states in *Signatures of the Visible* (1990), “What is becoming increasingly clear today is that demands for equality and justice projected by such groups are not (unlike the politics of social class) intrinsically subversive” (36).

In the first essay, Jameson discusses four irresolvable conundra peculiar to postmodern society. His rich and resourceful consideration of these “antinomies”—related to time, space, nature, and utopia—is not easily encapsulated, but the upshot of his analysis is that the postmodern period is rife with internal contradictions and that these paradoxes render political change impossible. However counterintuitive it might seem, citizens in postmodern democracies are in fact politically passive, even “postpolitical” (62). An “unparalleled rate of change” coexists with an “unparalleled standardization of everything” (15). Seemingly a period of great diversity, postmodernity is in fact characterized by an essential homogeneity, one driven by the primordial energies of the “market.” Incapable of fantasizing a counter-model, the postmodern subject is politically neutralized in a space and time where “absolute change equals stasis” (19).

Taken on its own (rather general) terms, Jameson’s argument is a powerful one. Postmodern change is superficial. It is regulated, in Jameson’s appropriation of Barthes, by the system itself; change is not “change” but rather predetermined modulation within the system. It is propelled by the imperatives of capital accumulation. “Public” space has been entirely supplanted by the rights and privileges of the private domain. Yet, the real problem for Jameson (and he knows it) is that “actually existent socialism” has not produced appreciably utopian societies (though he seems to hold out vague hope for China). Therefore, he is left to criticize the postmodern status quo, and often with justification, but cannot offer a superior alternative.

A recurrent problem with Jameson’s critique is its failure to reckon with the inexorable slide into dystopia that has marked all grand communitarian, i.e., “utopian,” states—whether postulated or empirical—from Plato’s *Republic* down to the Soviet Union and other twentieth-century left- and right-wing totalitarian regimes. Indeed, Jameson’s dismissal of liberal democratic forms brings to mind the old business of the baby and the bath water. To dispatch liberal democracy to the ash heap of history for its admitted imperfections might, given an austere academic frame of mind, have a superficial appeal. Yet, to do so would be to undermine that mode of political organization which has achieved the broadest

distribution of rights for its citizenry, that mode which has demonstrated the most consistent ability to carry out periodic self-correction.

Though *The Seeds of Time* is rather long on problem delineation and short on resolution, it is a valuable book. It encourages students of postmodernity to seek new political and theoretical paradigms with which to understand contemporary history even if its inability to point out a superior alternative to liberal democracy serves to confirm, if obliquely, that the latter offers us rather more than Fredric Jameson would have us believe.

A.S. Byatt

Babel Tower

London: Chatto and Windus, 1996. Pp. 625. Can. \$34.00

Reviewed by Jane Campbell

In this ambitious novel, the third in her projected quartet about the Potter family (the earlier volumes, *The Virgin in the Garden* and *Still Life*, were published in 1978 and 1985 respectively), Byatt continues the story of her characters, Frederica Potter (now married to Nigel Reiver), Daniel Orton, and Alexander Wedderburn, and their families and friends. *Still Life* ended with the accidental death of Stephanie and the desperate journey of her clergyman husband Daniel from his parish in Yorkshire to London. He was given sanctuary by Alexander, who had also helped Frederica in the first moments of her grief for her sister. Our last sight of Frederica in *Still Life* was an ominous one: in Nigel Reiver's possession, in his alien, isolated country house. *Babel Tower* is set in the Sixties. One of the book's narrative threads traces Frederica's progress as she leaves her now abusive husband, taking her young son Leo with her, and, finding work and friends (Alexander among them) in London, eventually begins divorce proceedings.

This novel, however, like its predecessors, is much more than a family chronicle. Its narrator identifies four possible starting points, each of which contains issues in the book. First, we could begin with the thrush, hammering his prey, the snail, to death and, after his feast, singing his lovely song. "Why does his song give us such pleasure?" The inseparability of pleasure and pain and the description of the broken snail shells introduces the book's preoccupation with opposites: order and chaos, creation and destruction. The reappearance of Frederica, encountering by chance her old Cambridge friend Hugh Pink, is the second beginning; the third returns to Daniel, now a worker on a church-sponsored telephone help line. His most recent anonymous caller is a frequent one, privately nicknamed Steelwire, calling to inform Daniel that because God is dead, "do as thou wilt shall be the whole of the law" (9). Finally, there is the first chapter of the book within this book, *Babbletower*, which turns out to have been