

# Description in the land of ideology

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## *Resisting Novels*

Lennard J. Davis: 1987  
New York: Methuen

### Introduction

Lennard Davis believes that novels are plotting against us. There is nothing unique about this paranoia; indeed the fashion for resistance to fiction was, I suppose, first popularized by that academic cocktail party chatter of the sixties which cheerfully announced the death of the novel. Where Davis differs, though, is in his belief that the novel is a complex form of defence mechanism, the local, capillary action of a larger system of bourgeois ideological control.

*Resisting Novels* is also an obstinately naïve work, a work which ignores several of the founding hypotheses of recent poststructuralist narratology. In this extended review article I shall examine critically the reliance by Davis and others on an equation between psychoanalysis, the interpretation of ideology, and the study of how individual readers process texts. My second purpose is to develop his account of ideology and descriptive detail, a field of study which has been ignored by contemporary narratologists and which for any politics of the novel it is vital to revive.

### 1 Resisting the Novel

Given their wide circulation on graduate and undergraduate reading lists, the Methuen introductory works on literary theory are amongst the most important sources of influence on young theorists today. It is to these survey works that we often return when on the vertiginous edge of some new post-structuralist metatreatise. But *Resisting Novels* is a quirkier, more polemical book than many in the same series. It begins in pseudo-confessional style with an account of how his early reading experiences in the Bronx made Davis “a perfect prisoner of the novel” (2). His aim now, he adds, is to work towards a cure for that reading disease which results in the daily spectacle of “solitary people, often in the midst of hordes of strangers, sitting passive, silent, hunched almost foetally over a small . . . pack of papers” (2). He does not, of course, succeed.

Davis's entire project rests on the assumption that “the novel is to culture as defences are to individuals” (2). Now this sort of equation, together with the rhetoric which associates the regulatory functioning of ideology with psychological mechanisms, is a founding principle in post-structuralism. Unlike most contemporary theorists, though, Davis believes he can explain

how ideology works at the level of *cognition*. It is at this point that he chooses to ignore an important body of recent opinion about the textual production of subjectivity.

Psychoanalysis, Davis claims, is a powerful hermeneutic method which helps us understand how ideology is embodied in fiction and processed by the psyche. Let us be sure what is meant here: he is suggesting an equivalence (rather than some form of homological relationship) between the transmission of social ideas and the production of mental structures, and he thus resembles other recent theorists who advance what has come to be called a "dominant ideology thesis", or the belief that ruling class ideology reproduces itself in consciousness.<sup>1</sup> Most literary theorists find this a thorny problem, most specifically because it means the writer is always within ideology and thus apparently unable to exert any critical leverage without postulating some sort of radical scientific "break".

In *Resisting Novels*, the problem of dominant ideology is given the briefest of acknowledgements: "We cannot listen to what the novel is saying to us," Davis admits, "because the novel, as a cultural phenomenon, is one part of a gigantic defence mechanism" (11). Most other practitioners take the problem (a version of Mannheim's paradox) more seriously, admitting that it requires a high degree of methodological self-consciousness. Umberto Eco's remark that "a system is of value only if it stimulates an advance to a new level of understanding of reality, a level on which it then seems inadequate" (1987: x-xi) is typical of this autocritical tendency. Similarly Peter Hulme has recently claimed that ideological analysis must be based on a self-conscious form of critique which advances only the provisional truth,

one that eschews the naïvety of any supposedly direct access to reality but claims an explanatory superiority over its rival versions, particularly since it includes within its analysis an explanation of why those rival claims might appear plausible. (8)

One could go on and on listing such examples of deliberate timidity.

Davis unashamedly yokes together the idea of cultural and personal defences in the argument of his first two chapters. This connection is sustained by yet another equation he makes between the activity of reading and psychic strategies revealed under the scrutiny of psychoanalysis. Novel reading, he explains, "prevents or inhibits social action as do many leisure activities in a consumer society" (8); the urge to read therefore resembles the repetition-compulsion in a patient resistant to healing. Once the idea of reading as a neurotic symptom is introduced, however, references to other psychic strategies start to proliferate, and defence mechanisms such as isolation, projection, identification and denial are all given correlatives in the way readers process texts. Novels help us, in other words, to cope with the stress and alienation which is an effect of consumer capitalism, for they encourage the development of collective defences which in turn serve transpersonal ideological purposes. To resist a novel, Davis concludes, one must arrive at the sort of self-understanding that is the goal of the psychoanalytic process. Such an achievement would

open the possibility for understanding the historical origins of novel-reading defences, the present function of such defences, and the ability to save ourselves as a culture from the passive and crippling effects of fiction as an obsession. (22)

I have traced the early steps of Davis's argument quite laboriously so as to demonstrate that his equation between ideology and consciousness is unashamedly direct. In the discussion that follows, I will examine why it is that post-structuralism is loathe to talk about individuals and texts in this fashion and how, ironically, Davis's thesis confines him to a formalist, pre-Freudian understanding of reading. This debate also entails more general reference to the politics of narratology when I consider, in sequence, Davis's chapters on character, plot and description.

## 2 Subjects and Characters

In a work which pursues so relentlessly the connection between psychic defences and strategies of ideological containment, one would expect the notion of character in fiction, despite its slight mustiness, to provide a rich occasion for discussion. Instead, we find in this and following chapters a significant lack of theoretical self-awareness.

Davis begins by arguing that the notion of literary "character" only emerges with the novel's rise to prominence on the wave of eighteenth-century bourgeois aspirations. Curiously, though, he combines this with the more polemical claim that "before the novel an extended description of personality and psychology did not exist" (103). However attractive such a proposition may be for its simplicity, it reveals a crude understanding of social forces and the evolution of literary forms.

Lennard Davis wishes us to understand that the novel exemplifies bourgeois ideology in that it appears to contain "units of complete personality that seem to be missing from life since the early modern period" (131); at the same time, he argues that the genre rises to sudden prominence during the Enlightenment. This seems far too convenient a narrative, especially for someone writing after Hindess and Hirst or Raymond Williams. In any social formation, the transition between modes of production is a long and complicated one, with different forces vying for dominance, while residual forms add to the clamour. So too "genre" should be understood as a functional term we apply to literary forms which in fact contain contending systems of organization. Is it therefore possible, or necessary, for us to determine when the "novel" detaches itself from allied narrative forms? In any event, there are still many competing versions of its genesis: Juliet Mitchell, for instance, makes the familiar claim that "literary forms arise as one of the ways in which changing subjects create themselves as subjects within a new social context," and goes on to add that the novel "starts with autobiographies written by women in the seventeenth century" (427); Nick Visser, on the other hand, reminds us that "the novel, in the broad sense of extended fictional prose narrative, had been available as a literary medium since the late classical period" (9).

In seeming ignorance of the way the argument over the novel's origins has recently progressed, Davis focusses narrowly on the emergence of "character" in eighteenth-century fiction. In tracing this history, he is forced to ignore the references to character and subjectivity in earlier Renaissance texts, texts which also promote emerging views of merchant capital, *homo oeconomicus*, and the circulation of commodities. It is precisely this sort of blindness to productive forces and the way capitalist social relations are reproduced through ideology that causes his historical analysis to falter.

Leaving aside this dubious historical narrative, let us now return to the central thesis of the chapter. The presence of literary "character", for Davis, also signals the presence of defence mechanisms, for an identification with fictional protagonists "changes the complexity of personality into a rather simplified commodity of desire" (128). Reading, in other words, is seen as a form of erotic identification. It is in making this point that Davis starts to rely heavily on terms borrowed from Freudian psychoanalysis.

*Resisting Novels* draws on the description of libidinal development first advanced by Freud and his followers, a theory based on the primacy of instinctual drives and one which has subsequently been modified by a host of writers such as Lacan, Klein, Winnicott, and object-relations theorists. In the classical model, the constitution of the psyche is mapped according to a hierarchy of developmental phases (oral, anal and genital), with the primary transition to adulthood signalled by the Oedipal conflict. Reading fiction, for Davis, involves a peculiar form of identification "whereby the trauma of that primary [Oedipal] first displacement from love object to rival can be re-enacted and reworked in an attempt to discharge it of its powerfully painful associations" (129). Novels, he says, make commodities out of characters, offering them up to us as erotic or libidinal objects, and therein lies the possibility for readers, through their identification with characters, to re-enact the agonizing Oedipal displacement. This argument (which draws heavily on the Freud of "The Ego and the Id"), then circles back to a comparison between psychic and social processes: the Oedipal sundering is compared with the alienating, fragmentary character of modern life. Novels, to put it another way, offer a double panacea in that they dramatize "through the process of displaced object desires, a complete and unalienated relationship to individuals and to a community" (131-132).

There is a missing presupposition in this argument which must be discussed before we can proceed further. Davis assumes, we will discover, that reading is a negative, regressive experience, because it offers the *illusion* of resolutions to real contradictions which originate in capitalist social relations. Literary characters, it seems, substitute for the objects onto which the ego (in the Freudian aetiology of the self) attaches itself. But there is also the unstated assumption that these fictional replacements cannot offer the possibility for development that psychic "objects" afford. So despite Davis's comments about the pleasure of reading, it is also condemned as a profoundly narcissistic activity associated with pre-Oedipal fixations. An identification with characters, we might conclude, encourages a return to that undifferentiated state Freud associated with Narcissism or melancholia in which "the

loss of the object [becomes] transformed into a loss in ego" ("Mourning", 1987: 131).

What is wrong with this argument? After all, the attempt to develop connections between psychic and social forces is one of the central concerns of modern critical theory. Despite a thesis which appears to have internal coherence, Davis's work differs radically from that of other theorists because it often fails to take into account the problem of importing terms from one discursive field into another. For instance, how can we speak of the "object" relations encouraged by a text when we have not even begun to speak about the relationship between subjectivity and symbolic organization? What would be the effect, say, of someone like Melanie Klein on this schema, a theorist who, unlike Freud, argues that symbolic projection is a function of the earliest stages of the child's development while still within the "paranoid-schizoid" position? Why, if Davis makes so much of the equation between characters and psychic "objects", does he not discuss recent object-relations theory which has an overwhelmingly positive view of artistic symbolization for its ability "to give external representation to objects therefore saved or restored from the ravages of internal attack" (Rustin 1989: 119). What of Winnicott? What of Lacan?

One of the major problems we encounter when reading this book is that it borrows terms from classical psychoanalysis and applies them directly without ever discussing the relationship between subjectivity and symbolic organization. Moreover, *Resisting Novels* relies on an informal repertoire of randomly applied terms (self, psyche, object, reification, ideology and so on), instead of a coherent description of social processes. But if we are to talk of developmental stages, and of formative exchanges between the ego and capitalist production, then we need to have a far more flexible understanding of how relations of production insist themselves upon human psychology. Here is one such description:

The reified ego, with its rational, self-preserving orientation towards outer reality, is that moment in the structure of subjectivity which is governed by the laws of commodity production, exchange and consumption. It is less a "psychological mechanism" than a field of perceptions, actions, and relations marked by the dominance of exchange value; reification is the historical result of those processes that transform the interhuman activities of producing, exchanging, and consuming into value production, exchange, and consumption. (Brenkman, 1987: 181)

This is not a better version of the argument because it is more complex. Despite the fact that Brenkman, too, is relying on Freud's theory of Narcissism to explain the effect of commodity fetishism on the psyche, his thesis is grounded on a description of social process. Reification, for Brenkman, "is a process, not an achieved condition, of capitalist society"; in turn, this sort of historical understanding makes it easier for us to distinguish between modernist aesthetics and the radically discontinuous play of meanings in late capitalist consumerism, both of which, on the surface, seem to emanate from reified consciousness.

The argument that novels encourage passivity by producing “collective defences” is a glib one at best. It is also a species of formalism, for *Resisting Novels* is more interested in categorizing defensive structures within works than understanding their discursive or historical functioning. Most of all, though, Davis’s statements about the role of “character” are naïve because they ignore all recent attempts to grapple with materialist conceptions of subjectivity, a debate which often traces its origins back to Althusser’s claim that “all ideology has the function . . . of ‘constituting’ concrete individuals as subjects” (Althusser, 1971: 171). Contemporary Marxism has been deeply influenced by Althusser and Lacan (as well as Foucault) precisely because they raise the possibility of a materialist conception of the subject, a conception which draws on psychoanalysis whilst at the same time rendering problematic the notion of fixed identity, ego and the transhistorical individual. Moreover, most of the uneasy truces that exist between contending academic discourses such as Marxism, feminism, and deconstruction are based on consensus about the need for a radical critique of the subject.<sup>2</sup>

What we find in *Resisting Novels*, then, is that an interesting thesis about the interconnectedness of ideology, subjectivity and fiction, is left stranded once it drifts away from contemporary political debate. It is not my purpose here to trace the outlines of that debate. Rather, I am attempting to show how the theoretical absent-mindedness we encounter in this work of theory affects its understanding of fiction. Perhaps nowhere is this more apparent than in Davis’s inflexible and inappropriate conception of reading.

Recent trends in cultural analysis have pointed away from reader-response theories of the text. In fact, the materialist description of the interpellated subject of ideology lends itself more logically to an understanding of reading in terms of audience response and class affiliation while at the same time leaving open the possibility of resistance, by individual readers, to the transformative promises of texts. Because he has no adequate understanding of social process, Lennard Davis constructs an authoritarian model of reading in which the professional novelist becomes like an omnipotent parent, and childlike readers “can only admire the act of creation and the possession over the character that such creation implies” (148). Fictional characters then become signs of a larger authority: “a coherent and rationalizing authority creates an order to which the reader must passively assent in order to allow the novel to work” (145).

What is it in Davis’s method that has led, inevitably, to this vision of the totalitarian text? To be blunt, if submission to a textual authority is equated with cognition itself, then there is no possibility that any of us, anywhere, will ever learn to “resist” a novel. Yet this is what Davis seems to be suggesting with his description of how defensive strategies are directed by the formal organization of a work. The notion of an absolutely authoritarian text seems to me to be the result of two serious theoretical misconceptions: first, there is the belief that subjects (or readers) are absolutely co-opted by dominant ideology; secondly, there is the assumption that the text is an inexorable semiotic process. I shall deal with the first misconception quickly, for I have already touched upon it.

It is now I think more readily accepted that ruling class ideology is never evenly distributed through all layers of society, and that there is a high degree of resistance – even in cases where capitalism commands a sophisticated surveillance technology – from the classes that are most severely repressed. This acceptance has to a certain extent followed criticism of the generalizing tendencies in Althusser which led, according to Perry Anderson, to “the erasure of the distinction between State and ‘civil society’ ” (Elliott, 1987: 233), and hence to an inability to distinguish between types of capitalist state. We can no longer, it is fair to say, simply assert that literary texts represent the interests of the ruling class in any instrumentalist way. A host of disciplines – from deconstruction to the history-from-below school – have preferred the weaker form of dominant ideology thesis which sees the influence of subordinate classes in the very coronation rituals of those in power.

The second misconception is perhaps more difficult to deal with, but had Davis been more attentive to debates within contemporary semiotics he would have been less sure that readers are utterly subjected to the will of the text. This is not the place to embark on a history of this belief in the unstoppable text, which is to a certain extent coterminous with structuralism. Rather, let us consider briefly one example of its functioning in the early work of Michael Riffaterre.

Riffaterre’s infamous article on Wordsworth’s “New Trees”, for instance, advances a model of semiotic analysis which depends on the reader’s ability to follow chains of semantic variation. It is the most authoritarian model I know. In such a schema, the reader is simply the recorder of grammatical anomalies, whereas the text itself has a machine-like life of its own: “once the sequence has started moving – all function as structural elements of that obsessive, rapidly overwhelming semantic variant” (1981: 114). As if this were not diminishing enough, the reader is then described as being no more than the text itself. One’s competence therefore consists in there being an equivalence between the texts one carries (the knowledge of other works, as well as personal beliefs, for instance) and the intertextual codes of the literary work.

When examined closely, descriptions such as these of a text which “works” only through subjugation can be severely criticized. Narration is seen as a syntactical extension of an initial pattern, “inactive” sections of the text are disregarded, and we are back to the alienating metaphor of language as a machine which throbs on independently, becoming interesting only when it produces some remarkable spark. The same is true, in the broadest sense, of the text viewed as an expression of dominant ideology which then co-opts its readers. It is a measure of Davis’s naivety, and perhaps also of the naivety of criticism generally, that there are few totalizing theories of ideology around today outside literary studies. However much it may seem that a text attempts to situate us, or produce us as class subjects, or encourage the production of psychic defences, it is still possible for us to be “competent” readers while at the same time expressing political difference. That, finally, marks the distinction between a belief in “readers” and an understanding of the *subjects* of political discourse, for novels participate in that consensual system

associated with the battle for political hegemony, and as such they can never succeed in persuading us completely.

### 3 Plot or Narrative?

I have been arguing that *Resisting Novels* is uncertain of what connections it can draw between texts and subjects. Let us now consider how this problem reproduces itself, in contradictory ways, in Davis's description of what he calls "plot".

The decision to focus on "plot" rather than "narrative" is a conscious one, for Davis sets himself in opposition to the particular trend in contemporary narratology "that sees plot or narrative structure as a kind of universal given" (192). This decision has immediate and far-reaching consequences, for once he has rid his argument of references to narrative discourse he cannot provide an account of how readers actually process details. Similarly, although there are passing allusions to Genette's categorization of intra- and extradiegetic perspectives, and to Ann Banfield (but not Dorrit Cohn or Mieke Bal), the question of narrative focalization is actually never raised. Crudely put, a focalizer (as distinct from a narrator) is the character or consciousness in any narrative sequence which regulates our access to information; the term is therefore an important empirical addition to our understanding of how subject positions are manipulated by the ideological text (Genette, 1980: 189). In fact, I would suggest that the idea of narrative focalization can be combined with a weaker version of the dominant ideology thesis which, as Tom Bottomore describes it, admits the capacity of ruling class ideology "not to bring about social integration or even to reinforce the cohesion of a dominant class . . . but to inhibit and confuse the development of the counter ideology of a subordinate class" (Bottomore, 1980: x). Such a view of the ideological text, in contrast to Davis's, produces an understanding of narrative as a discursive category which enables the restriction, but not the elimination of readerly resistance.

While on the subject of narrative, I cannot avoid remarking on Davis's idealised and inaccurate history of narrative forms. He distinguishes between storytelling, storytellers and myths on the one hand, and on the other professional novelists who are accused of creating commodified plots. Now it is unquestionable that the development of capitalist social relations has hastened the decline of orature, but there is no excuse for counterposing (in a distortion of Benjamin) a portrait of the pre-novelistic world in which humanity "lived in the thrall of folkloric plots" (201) and the novel "which can never participate in the pervasiveness and truly interactive aspect of *natural narration*" (237, my emphasis). Contrary to what Davis believes, all forms of symbolization, capitalist or pre-capitalist, are expressions of the contradictory social forces which surround them. There is no "natural" narrative at all, anywhere; there is only narrative which bears, to a lesser or greater degree, the traces of contending powers. Thus it is the worst sort of logocentric error to assume a prelapsarian community of shared values, separate from gender and class relations, in which there is common access to storytelling. Perhaps

I should not be so surprised to find Davis making this mistake when his single allusion to Derrida exhibits the following profound misunderstanding: "The work of Jacques Derrida," he says, "also serves as a critique of . . . western culture's tendency to valorize the written sign over the spoken utterance" (175). This is of course to completely reverse the terms of Derrida's critique.

There is an element of real interest in Davis's work on plot which emerges with his claim that the novel genre reinforced "a collective structure of defences that gave eighteenth-century society a way to justify the ownership of certain kinds of property" (54). More particularly, he believes that the invention of consumable, copyrighted plots is a mark of the general trend during the Enlightenment towards the dominance of exchange value and commodity relations. "The rather early recognition of literature as property," he adds, "can be seen in the founding of copyright laws in the first quarter of the eighteenth century" (201). However, an historical analysis based solely on an understanding of the commodification of novelistic plots errs seriously, it seems to me, because it misrepresents the development of literary relations of production. Even if we accept the premise that exchange value was an increasingly important feature of eighteenth-century society, and that this shift is visible in the commodification of plots, any history of social relations must take into account the circulation of those commodities between widely different texts. What, for instance, is the political meaning implicit in the proliferation of plots drawn from mercantilist travels? Under what circumstances are these plots compressed, summarised, or redistributed? What is the ideological function of the neo-classical concept of *imitatio*? Questions such as these direct us away from the narrow study of novels towards the more fertile analysis of how knowledge is produced.

Davis's work on literature and property remains useful. Seen differently though, in terms of economic history, the conception of literature as a commodity is a far earlier phenomenon than he imagines. With the rise of merchant capital, the decline of court patronage, and the eventual disappearance of the court masque in the seventeenth century, there is an increasing professionalization of knowledge and it is here that we find the first tentative suggestions that texts are marketable properties. Writers like Ben Jonson, as Tony Parr has so persuasively shown, have a deeply ambiguous response to the idea of professional authorship; but it is a response to a problem which Davis believes does not emerge for another century.

#### 4 Description

I have been severe in my judgement of *Resisting Novels*, perhaps because I sympathize with Davis's aims. There is much to be said for continuing to base our understanding of fiction on hypotheses about ideological production, though we must pass beyond the narrow Althusserianism of the seventies. As it turns out, however, by far the most successful contribution Davis has to make is not on the question of ideology, or indeed on the nature of texts and psychoanalysis, but rather in his re-evaluation of literary description. The remainder of my discussion is devoted to this topic, and I will begin by placing

the debate in a wider context than the one referred to in *Resisting Novels*.

Structuralism rid us almost completely of the term "description", and for some time we have been dangerously mute on the subject of fictional landscapes and the reality models they support. In retrospect, it is apparent that the detour away from "description" as an explanatory category was latent even in the antipropositionalist assumptions of Anglo-American New Criticism. In formalist analyses, the term "description" usually applied to settings in which poetic personae were located, rather like the detailed undergrowth in a Claude Lorraine painting which serves to highlight the mythological creatures who peer voyeuristically from within it. A still more common fallacy – originating in Lessing's *Laocoon* and culminating in Joseph Frank's "Spatial Form in Modern Literature" (1945) – is that description has the effect of blocking or interrupting narrative flow.

Any theory which emphasizes spatiality or pictorial elements in texts runs the risk of placing description, as a category of space, in opposition to narration, considered as a representation of temporality. This tendency is exemplified in the early work of Gérard Genette, where it is suggested that "narration . . . places the accent on the temporal and dramatic aspect", while description "seems to suspend the course of time and tends to spread out narration in space" (1980: 158). In fact modern semiotics, dependent on paradigms similar to Genette's seems to falter completely over the vexed question of descriptive detail. If one early tendency was to define description negatively as the interruption of narration, then there is another parallel belief – originating in Saussure and continuing in structuralism – which claims that it is simply a textual nervous tic, a pseudo-mimetic gesturing which operates only to confirm the reader's mimetic expectations.

Most accounts of descriptive detail in work by Barthes, Culler and Riffaterre rely very heavily on binary oppositions: they depend, for the most part, on a distinction between active or "thematized" details and those that are inessential to the work's meaning. Without going into the debate too deeply, it seems to me that there are three general problems which arise when description is relegated to a low level of priority in the discursive hierarchy: first, this encourages a crude understanding of cognition, one which ignores the role of details in establishing frames or gestalts which enable the reading process; secondly, if the only function allowed to description is that it creates textual verisimilitude, then this suggests an unproblematically direct relationship between descriptive conventions and readers' beliefs; finally, theories which categorize literary description as a mimetic convention, or as a sub-species of narration, tend also to ignore the historical nature of the descriptive model. It is this latter tendency which is most alarming of all, for it still lies at the heart of contemporary narratology.

Most narratologists still employ a hierarchy of terms when describing narrative transactions, and even in the most scrupulous contemporary analysis the old dichotomy between space and time reappears. But what all these theorists miss is that even those descriptive passages which appear quite static have a distinct order of unfolding. What happens, according to semioticians like Sternberg, is that the spatial nature of the object being

described affects the mode of textual presentation; the description is not a-temporal, but it relies heavily on different forms of temporal ordering such as sequence and analogy.

So the overall tendency of contemporary narratology is to dissolve the term description within a vaguer definition of narrative discourse. Indeed there has been considerable hostility over the whole question, fuelled by the recent decade of debate over literary realism. Instead of enquiring into the historical forces which shaped specific descriptive strategies, we find that writers often adopt a strangely moralizing tone when commenting on superfluous detail. Naomi Schor's assertion that "any reading strategy which assigns these parasitic details a privileged role might properly be described as decadent" (1980: 29) represents the silliest extreme in the debate, for by dismissing "any poetics which recuperates . . . surplus details" she ignores a major source of evidence for the text's ideological practice.

Lennard Davis's chapter on literary description relies on the commonplace assumption that novelistic space simply employs "ideological presuppositions about the nature of property and lands" (54). Astonishingly, it also seems completely ignorant of the debate over literary description in current narrative theory. Despite this major disadvantage, the chapter contains some useful insights about literary *topoi*, insights which are of particular relevance to the study of colonial writing.

Novels, for Davis, represent a uniquely adapted method of representing landscape which for the first time is "outside of an exterior, fixed system of meaning such as that provided by allegory" (58). Pre-eighteenth century landscapes, he says, are primarily dependent on allegorical frames of reference, while in the age of mercantile exploration description becomes increasingly cartographic and obsessed with inventory. So early works such as *Robinson Crusoe* display a mixture of novelistic and pre-novelistic attitudes towards fictional terrain. Defoe refers extensively to exotic lands, but the concept of extended description is actually very foreign to him and he relies mainly on inventory and ballad-like repetition when attempting to order the disordered colonial environment (Davis, 1987: 83).

What Davis does in this chapter is extremely useful. He suggests that a sense of "location" (defined as an intentional, novelistic use of space) is extremely rare in the eighteenth-century text.

Gradually, however, the novel becomes the genre primarily responsible for imbuing space with ideological significance. What is revealing about this argument is that it makes extensive reference to art history and colonial discourse studies, two traditions which have continued to examine descriptive mechanisms despite the unpopularity of the subject in contemporary narratology. Commenting on parallel traditions in landscape painting, Davis compares Florentine Renaissance *topoi*, which are largely symbolic; seventeenth-century Dutch landscape painting, which reveals an interest in topography and catalogues; and eighteenth-century English landscapes, where there is a sharply increased interest in the representation of property. This brief history enables him to make the general claim that in eighteenth-century painting and fiction we find "the freight of a middle-class interest in

controlled property of which the colonial experience is a compelling metaphor" (85).

Davis's thesis on fictive locations is a compelling one, mainly because it is in this section, really for the first time, that he begins to look at the connections between texts and social forces. Nevertheless, though the argument seems useful when applied generally to early colonial literature it is wildly inaccurate when substituting for a history of descriptive practices. Because Davis focusses so much attention on the novel, and, more especially, because he believes the novel is uniquely adapted so as to advance an ideologically-charged understanding of property, he ignores the intertextual forces which influence the development of different tropes.

*Resisting Novels* devotes considerable attention to that familiar moment in the colonial novel when nature is described as presenting a sort of spectacle, as though offering a dramatic performance for a metropolitan audience. What is constantly missing from the analysis, though, is the understanding that such strategies are also *conventional*. Consider the following example, from Melville's semi-autobiographical *Typee*, of a description which reveals several contending influences:

The narrow valley, with its steep and close adjoining sides draped with vines, and arched overhead with a fretwork of interlacing boughs, nearly hidden from view by masses of leafy verdure, seemed from where I stood like an immense arbor disclosing its vista to the eye, whilst as I advanced it insensibly widened into the loveliest vale eye ever beheld. (1964: 43)

It is correct, in a banal sort of way, to say that such theatrical descriptions are ideological, but this type of opinion is too generalized to contribute to a social history of descriptive forms. Melville is obviously using a European aesthetic; however, the passage is also organized around certain tropes which enable the ideological and cognitive processing of the details. Instead of simply providing details which contribute to *l'effet de réel*, this passage invites meditation on the act of framing, just as the elaborate borders which surround the title on the frontispiece of an eighteenth-century travelogue call attention to the conventional nature of the narrative that follows. Melville uses a metaphor of the framing proscenium arch, replete with drapes, which then extends into an "arbor", a perspectival device which organizes the view of an estate for its owner. The net effect is to call attention to the conventional and picturesque nature of what is being described. The view through the arbor reveals the Typee valley, of course, but it is also recognizably a type of other "happy valleys" such as Johnson's *Rasselas*.<sup>3</sup> Finally, an account of landscape in *Typee* would have to explain the origin of these conventions, and it would also have to discuss Melville's direct borrowing from contemporary travelogues such as Stewart's *A Visit to the South Seas* and Ellis's *Polynesian Researches*.

What I am suggesting, therefore, is that to understand the ideological nature of description we must refer as well to its productive capacity. To put it another way, description has a cognitive as well as a transpersonal ideological function: it works productively by alluding to intertexts, conventions, *topoi* and tropes, all in the attempt to constitute an ideal audience that

shares a common political purpose. To understand the economics of description, therefore, it is necessary to historicize the exchanges *between* texts instead of concentrating narrowly on the novel. Space in the colonial novel, to extend the example we have been using, appears as a patchwork of stock descriptions taken from popular geographies and summarized accounts of exploration in monthly magazines. For this sort of economic and political interrelatedness, it is probably best to retain the term discourse.

My second criticism of the history of literary description offered in *Resisting Novels* is that it rests on mistaken assumptions about capitalist economic development. One of the book's central propositions is that capitalist social relations result, in the twentieth century, in the phenomenon of widespread reification. This thesis is then applied to the modernist text in which, Davis claims, we find a complete reliance on "aesthetic" criteria and a fetishization of literary form. Such an argument will be familiar to most readers. It is in fact precisely the same as that used by Fredric Jameson in his seminal discussions of modernism. Like Davis, Jameson believes the novel is a mediating form in which contradictory experiences are rewritten as a seemingly unified world view. The difficulty of such an ideological task is clearly apparent in Conrad's works, for instance, which document the sense of loss associated with the spread of capitalism "to the last vestiges of precapitalist social relations in the most seemingly insignificant backwaters of the globe" (*The Political Unconscious*, 1981: 227).

When analysing late capitalism's effects on consciousness, both Davis and Jameson are necessarily reliant on Lukács's description of reification. Reified consciousness, for Lukács, is that structure in which "the relations between men that lie hidden in the immediate commodity relation, as well as the relations between men and the objects that should really gratify their needs, have faded to the point where they can be neither recognized nor even perceived" (1971: 93). Jameson takes the argument a step further: reification, he says, mirrors the division of labour; it actually causes a split in the psyche in which the "quantifying functions of the mind become privileged in such a way as to take structural precedence over older functions, a new form of unequal development being thereby perpetuated" (1981: 228). Like all dominant ideology theorists, in other words, Jameson wants to show how ruling class ideology permeates every level of human experience: on the economic level, capitalism establishes itself as a worldwide force systematically underdeveloping peripheral nations; within the psyche, it causes quantifying mental functions to become overdeveloped, to the detriment of "archaic" mental powers; on the aesthetic level, "surplus" sense perceptions have to be reorganized, and this explains the historical emergence of descriptive forms such as landscape painting, impressionism, and modernist novels which "rewrite the world and its own data in terms of perception as a semi-autonomous activity" (1981: 230).

This view of descriptive mechanisms makes generalized reference to the relationship between mental and economic states. Moreover, Jameson's account of the expansion of trade into the non-capitalist periphery is an oversimplification, which, like all underdevelopment theory, places far too

little emphasis on the manner in which capitalism revolutionizes its productive mechanisms.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, when the argument is extended to the history of literary forms, one cannot account for the relationship between specific state practices and the intertextual or tropological nature of literary description. Neither Davis nor Jameson understand the political nature of description because they rely on a generalized theory about productive forces in the capitalist and colonial state. The problem is substantially exacerbated when terms are simplified further so as to sustain the analogy between economic forces and psychic life.

What are we to say about description in the modernist text, and is it true, as Jameson and Davis imply, that the impressionist method in novelists like Conrad dramatizes perception “as a semi-autonomous activity”? As a final example, consider the following well-known passage from *Heart of Darkness*:

Everything . . . in the station was in a muddle – heads, things, buildings. Strings of dusty niggers with splay feet arrived and departed; a stream of manufactured goods, rubbishy cottons, beads, and brass-wire sent into the depths of darkness, and in return came a precious trickle of ivory. (1974: 68)

This is “impressionism” only in the most superficial sense; neither is it an act of description which operates solely in the service of dominant ideology. Rather, Conrad draws explicit connections between perception and ideology in most of his novels (“My task,” he says in the Preface to *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’*,” is, before all, to make you see” (1947: x), and a blurred perceptual field or delayed decoding may be a sign of one ideological frame of reference vying with another.<sup>5</sup> In this extract, the audience is positioned so that initially activities at the station seem random and disordered. Despite the Dickensian transposition of animate and inanimate objects in phrases such as “heads, things, buildings”, distinct patterns of movement start to appear after a while. Firstly, the porters come and go unceasingly; secondly, their labour sets in motion “a stream of manufactured goods” which disappears into the interior and which is answered by a countercurrent, “a precious trickle of ivory”.

The passage from Conrad teaches us something about the political nature of description, something ignored by most of the theorists we have been discussing. Following Sternberg, I suggested earlier that moments of descriptive density usually rely on extrinsic points of reference – an implied audience with a particular ideological stance, for instance – to justify the sequential order of their unfolding. The *Heart of Darkness* extract illustrates an important point about description within the text of ideology. Conrad has in mind an audience that must be taught to “see” imperialist activity free of jingoism. Thus the description encourages critical awareness by first pretending to record random, meaningless activity. The audience, however, learns to naturalize the detail by accepting a different point of reference located in an explanation of capitalist exchange and imperialist productive forces. This is the meaning behind the three patterns of movement that gradually reveal themselves. Contrary to what Jameson suggests, Conrad does not simply mourn the intrusion of trade into the tropics. Instead, he seems conscious of

transformations in the productive system that prefigured full-scale imperialism. What is equally significant is that the passage does more than provide a clever account of the transition from use value to exchange value; it also contains evidence of the way Conrad imposes new frames of reference onto older narrative and descriptive paradigms, and this layering can also be analysed historically. For instance, the older trope (much beloved by mercantile trader-adventurers) of free passage from the coast to the interior is transformed in the extract so as to reflect the way in which economic *exchange* now takes place between these two zones. Traces of an even earlier, pre-mercantile description of interior Africa as an utopia, or treasure cache, still remain, but instead of individuals setting off inland to discover wealth or truth, value is now located in a labour system which encourages the unequal exchange of commodities (a “precious trickle of ivory” versus “rubbishy cottons”) between the coast and the interior. Though Conrad’s descriptions are often impressionistic, the method is strategically employed for specific ideological ends.

In order to understand the political nature of literary description, we should routinely ask the following questions: What ideological frame of reference – which the audience is invited to share – controls the sequential organization of detail in a passage? What discursive and intertextual traces are present in the description, and, once these are situated historically, what do they tell us about changes in the relations of production? It is this analytical process, and not some vague sense of a putative cure based on psychoanalysis, that enables us to resist the positioning effects of description. In the process, however, we are likely to uncover evidence of contradictory opinions. In Conrad, for instance, the deconstruction of imperialist ideology is often coupled, astonishingly, with a belief in the virtues of certain types of colonialism. These widely divergent views can only be explained with reference to the history of the colonial state itself, which was driven by “the contradictory purpose of accumulation, both local and metropolitan, but within a framework of local control” (Lonsdale, 1981: 109). Contradictory functions, in other words, are reflected in contradictory beliefs; throughout early modernism we find novelists and economists who are fiercely opposed to imperialism while at the same time clinging to the idea of paternalistic colonial control.

Contrary to what Davis and Jameson imply, colonial space plays a crucially ennobling ideological role for such writers. To dismiss what at first appears to be superfluous detail as evidence simply of reified consciousness is to radically misunderstand the political history of literary modernism. While on the face of it appearing to be repelled by imperialism, modernist novelists rely heavily on colonial *topoi*, and carefully managed exotic locales, in their attempt to find a dramatic context for liberal values being undermined by the destruction of Liberal consensus in England. The history of landscape in modernism is thus coincident with a colonial nostalgia for exotic landscapes. New descriptive paradigms are added to old so as to create a form of aesthetic “primitivism” visible in a wide range of writers like Forster, Lawrence and Graham Green in England, as well as continental writers and painters like Freud, Thomas Mann, Gauguin, Braque and Picasso.

Ideological analysis of the sort advanced by Lennard Davis is conducted at a level of extreme generality, blind to the knowledge that, as one historian put it, “the functional relation of ideology and economy is . . . a contingent one, specifiable only at the level of concrete societies” (Abercrombie, 1980: 29). So if we are truly to “resist” novels, we have at the same time to see their narrative and descriptive procedures in historical terms, within the experience of specific states and forms of production, while at the same time trying to understand their intertextual functioning. Such a hermeneutic method is not encouraged by a return to concepts such as plot, character or reader.

*Resisting Novels* is, therefore, a severely limited work which contains a number of provocative, unusually insightful claims. Paradoxically, Davis’s argument tails off towards the end of the book into a pessimistic conclusion which is the logical outcome of his initial thesis: “The novel,” he admits gloomily, “has totally failed in a political sense as far as the working classes are concerned” (230). What is most ironic, in the end, is that Davis, having earlier thoroughly sentimentalized the role of “natural narration” in fairy tale and folklore, appears not to be able to stomach his own bleak findings. In the final chapter of the book we are left with the rather pathetic image of the critic casting about for some popular contemporary narrative form which at the same time avoids the “normalizing and regularizing function” of the novel. Having ruled out film and television, Davis eventually pins a meagre amount of hope on the emergence of new technologies such as the interactive video disc system that allows a listener to influence the unfolding of a story. Nothing else in this book speaks to me so forcibly of the dispersed political consciousness of the American Left in the filmic sunset of the Reagan years.

## Notes

1. The term “dominant ideology thesis” was coined by Abercrombie, Hill et al. (1980), and I have their argument in mind.
2. As the star of deconstruction fades, one cannot but notice the sharpening divisions between these theoretical discourses, though the degree to which they are compatible depends on their specific institutional location. In a provocative if rather pessimistic recent article, Robert Young sums up the debate as follows: Though “literary theory” may appear as a homogeneous entity to its opponents, it is not self-identical but set against itself. The crisis consequent upon its institutional success has produced an outbreak of internal conflict which is taking place in Britain between three forms of theory – which for the sake of argument I shall characterise as Marxism, feminism, deconstruction – that compose a triad of differentiated positions each of which makes political claims to the exclusion of the others (Young, 1989: 136).
3. Knox-Shaw (1987: 69–90) offers an illuminating description of influences on Melville from Johnson and Rousseau. My emphasis is slightly different: ideally, I would want to examine the economy of exchanges between different sources, as well as the function of journal illustrations, summaries of explorer narratives in working class newspapers, and popular geographies, all of which provide intertexts which enable the transmission of ideas about Polynesian Otherness.
4. Brenner (1977) still provides the most powerful and appropriate rejoinder to the generalizing tendencies in underdevelopment theory.

5. "Delayed decoding" is the term invented by Ian Watt (1980: 169–299) to explain that extraordinary habit in Conrad whereby a scene is rendered intelligible in a series of slow perspectival shifts.

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