

In Defence of Negativity:
Jameson, Felman, and Marxist Aesthetics*

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Now it may be that rediscovering a certain Freud within Marx is itself *unheimlich*, for the uncanny for Freud is thought of above all in terms of repetition-as-failure. (8)

The negativity which gnaws at and motivates history is utterly subordinate to an invincible positivity. (9)

-----Jeffrey Mehlman, *Revolution and Repetition: Marx/Hugo/Balzac*

Modernism begins with the search for a Literature which is no longer possible. (38)

-----Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*

I

Inspired by Shoshana Felman's epoch-making, though now almost forgotten book, *The Scandal of the Speaking Body: Don Juan with J. L. Austin or Seduction in Two Languages*, I would like to compare Shoshana Felman's and Fredric Jameson's approaches to negativity. Felman brilliantly and almost scandalously foregrounds a latent but crucial resemblance, or comparability between Don Juan, J. L. Austin, and Freud, and thereby focuses on their shared preoccupation with what she calls 'radical negativity'. My juxtaposition of Felman and Jameson is also an examination of their interest in negativity, particularly their critique of positivist historicism. The institutionalisation of New Historicism since the 1980s, and its continuation as a current critical trend, quite often make us oblivious of their radical intervention in historicist avoidance, or repression of negativity. Given this theoretical oblivion, it should be stressed that the Post-New Historicist phobia of negativity has been

unrelentingly dominant and hegemonic in a way that has not allowed us to recover.

Symptomatic of this theoretical allergy is no doubt a sheer and frequent misunderstanding of the first line, and famous declaration of Jameson's *The Political Unconscious*: 'Always historicize!' Surprisingly, this line is quite often quoted or referred to by historicist critics to justify their Post-New Historicist positivism. However, in many cases, the implication of the sentence immediately after this line escapes their attention: 'This slogan—the one absolute and we may even say “transhistorical” imperative of all dialectical thought—will unsurprisingly turn out to be the moral of *The Political Unconscious* as well' (ix). As I shall argue, Jamesonian dialectic can be regarded as a Lacanian psychoanalytic one, the historical movement of which is driven by what can *never* be reduced to or contained within history *per se*, something negative, irreducible, or impossible to contextualise. Paradoxically, this radically negative and un-historicisable 'something' is constitutive of positivist history in a fundamentally dialectical and psychoanalytic manner. It is precisely in this sense that Jameson's negative dialectic proves to be analogous to what Felman terms 'Don Juanian performative language'.

II

Jameson's historicisation of Joseph Conrad's impressionism argues that Conrad's excessively aesthetic descriptions of the sea can be considered as a historical product of the nineteenth century 'positivist pseudo-scientific myth of the functioning of the mind and the senses', while simultaneously being in *excess* of such an 'ideology of the image and sense perception' (200). Jameson's dialectic thus reveals the ways in which positivist psychology produces such an 'ideology of the image and sense perception'. Meanwhile, this discourse's affinity with capitalist reification, which is characterised by 'calculation, measurement, profit' (217) or 'rational parts of the psyche' (207), causes the 'very activity of sense perception' (217) to be 'the more archaic functions' (208) and hence 'unused surplus capacity' (217). This means that such an 'unused surplus capacity of sense perception can only reorganize itself

into a new and semi-autonomous activity', which privileges 'the experience of purely abstract color' (218). This hyper-aestheticisation is certainly 'the result of a process of abstraction and reification' (218), but at the same time its excessiveness is such that it produces 'the realm of nonperception' or something 'nonperceptible' (230). This aesthetic intensity may be said to be the outside of the inside of the history of Conradian impressionism.

According to Jameson's dialectic: 'The realm of nonperception must be a heightened form of perception in its own right, a realm of heightened yet blank intensity'. Hence, this is 'the attainment by Conrad's impressionism of its own outer limit, the working through of the dialectic of sensory registers to the point at which the latter virtually abolish themselves' (230). The positivist scientist's abstraction of sense perception, while working with capitalist reification, thus produces *and* 'abolishes' the capacity of sense perception: their privileging of 'sensory registers' is constitutive of something *beyond* their own sensory capacity. This is what Jameson calls 'a symbolic act ... seizing on the Real in all its reified resistance'. He adds that it is 'a libidinal resonance no doubt historically determinate, yet whose ultimate ambiguity lies in its attempt to stand beyond history' (226), something which 'opens up a hole in time and a void at the center of reality' (228). The paradox here is that, as I have already suggested, something radically negative and on the outside of history is generative of history, thus working as an inside *and* outside dialectical and negative force.

In this regard, Jameson remarks:

[T]he conventional relationship between narrative and ideology is here reversed. In such "purer" descriptive passages, the function of the literary representation is not to underscore and perpetuate an ideological system; rather, the latter is cited to authorize and reinforce a new representational space. This reversal then draws ideology inside out like a glove, awakening an alien space beyond it. (219)

Clearly, the conventional positivist approaches to history do not work here

because they can be understood as a contextual reduction of aesthetic language to given contemporary ideologies. Jameson implies that Conrad's hyper-aestheticisation is certainly a product of the nineteenth century positivist pseudo-science, but simultaneously is in *excess* of this ideology, and therefore, its dialectical deviation does not have any given contextual referent at this historical stage. Hence, Jameson concludes that: 'it is here the term limit which spells the end and the fulfillment of Conrad's impressionism and opens up the chance to register history itself' (231). In the dialectical dynamic of history, ideologies produce within themselves something *outside* themselves and such a dialectical force allows Jameson to mention: 'the Utopian vocation of Conrad's style at these extreme moments of intensities' (218). This discussion critiques positivist historicism as something that represses the dialectical and *negative* possibility of Utopian language, thereby working as a mere confirmation of the status quo.

III

Shoshana Felman's distinction between 'constative' and 'performative' languages encourages us to re-interpret and radicalise what Jameson terms "[n]arrative as a socially symbolic act'. In making this distinction, Felman draws our attention to Don Juan's repetitive failure to keep his promises and his antagonists' indignation. It is understandable that the latter's indignation against Don Juan is based on the assumption that 'language is an instrument for transmitting *truth*' (original emphasis) and therefore '[t]ruth is a relation of perfect congruence between an utterance and its referent, and, in a general way, between language and the reality it represents' (13). The 'constative' language, thus defined, is highly relevant to that of positivist historians, whose conviction would be that any part of given literary texts must have their contextual referent—the belief that every element in literary language can be contextualised within or reduced to given historical discourses. Felman connects this kind of constative reductionism with positivist 'ideas of history'.

The contrast to this constative language, which Felman calls 'performative' in reference to Austin, Don Juan, and Freud, cannot altogether be reduced to

its referent or contexts, but rather is itself constitutive or productive of its own referent or contexts. As Felman states: ‘... neither for psychoanalysis nor performative analysis is language a *statement* of the real, a simple reflection of referent or its mimetic representation. Quite to the contrary, the referent is itself produced by language as its own *effects*’ (original emphases). Therefore, Felman continues: ‘[t]he referent is no longer simply a pre-existing *substance*, but an *act*, that is, a dynamic movement of modification of reality’ (51; original emphases). This is what Austin considers ‘force of utterance’, a performative act which Felman highlights as ‘the referential excess of utterance’ or ‘a sort of energizing residue’. Which therefore means that ‘an utterance is always, irreducibly, in *excess* over its statement’ (52; original emphasis).

Interestingly, Felman’s point is that this kind of performative act, which is irreducible to its referent, is also what the ‘history of ideas ... proves not to have retained, not to have been able to “digest”, to incorporate, or to assimilate’ (96). Felman maintains:

What is not understood, what—here as elsewhere—history is determined not to retain, determined to *miss*, that is, to *refuse in the very gesture of accepting*, is always the radical value—at once subversive and self-subversive—with which the original thinker invested the force of *negativity* itself. In the simplifications that followed, historically, the negative has always been understood as what is reducible, what is to be eliminated, that is, as what by definition is opposed, is referred, is *subordinated* to the ‘normal’ or to the ‘positive.’ (101; original emphases)

A strong affinity exists between Felman’s critique of positivist historicism and Jameson’s dialectical insight into something negative in history. Equally important is their shared interest in some performative, active, or negative movement in history, what Felman and Austin term ‘force of utterance’ (53) or ‘performative utterance’ (52) and Jameson calls ‘narrative as a socially symbolic act’ respectively. What Felman regards as ‘a dynamic movement of modification of reality’ is closely connected with the Jamesonian dialectic of

history, in which pre-given discursive contexts such as positivist science and capitalist reification produce within themselves something radically irreducible to and beyond their ideologies. In this manner, something dialectical, negative and performative here is constitutive and generative of the kind of history which later positivist discourse historicised as ‘modernism’ or ‘impressionism’. This negativity in Jameson’s dialectical historiography can be taken for what Felman calls ‘radical negativity’, something that ‘cannot be reduced to a negative that is the simple—symmetrically—contrary of the “positive”’(101). This is because, as we have observed, Jameson’s and Felman’s negativity is the outside of the inside of positivist history and this ontologically paradoxical status of the negative is, once again, the generative core of positivist history itself.

Just like Freudian patients’ denial of the unconscious—of course the unconscious manifests itself in the very act of their denial—the negativity as we have discussed it may be symptomatically discernible in the positivist repression of it. In any case, the positive/negative dichotomy is radically deconstructed. As both Felman and Jameson suggest, if this negativity has the potentiality of ‘a dynamic movement of modification of reality’, and if this Utopian possibility could be viewed by a negative/positive deconstruction, then it becomes evident that the positivist repression of the negative only serves as an ideological and symptomatic confirmation of our present historical situation and plight, the *cul-de-sac* of capitalist optimism or positivism.

IV

To clarify the theoretical affinity between Jameson and Felman, it is important to examine what Felman calls ‘radical negativity’. As I have said, this negativity is a deconstruction of the positive/negative. According to Felman: ‘Now it is just this scandal of unclassifiable radicality, of a force whose negativity is such that it splinters the very structure of negative/positive alternative, that history cannot assimilate’ (105). Felman’s paradox is that radical negativity, something history can never contain or understand, is itself generative of history: ‘Paradoxically, the things that have no history ... are what

make history' (106). This paradox allows one to argue that this historical movement is indicative of its performative ignorance of what it really does, as in the case of Freudian neurotics. This is reminiscent of the Jamesonian dialectic, in which a given historical discourse, such as positivist pseudo-science, produces what it can never assimilate or comprehend without any knowledge of this performance. Felman foregrounds such historical performance as: 'the *logic of the scandal* of historical practice, owing to the very fact that it has enough force to set in motion a systematic series of misunderstandings, that is, a historical operation—no doubt unconscious—of repression' (107; original emphases). Felman argues that Marx is also preoccupied with 'the radical schism between "force" and "meaning"' or 'the disparity between "saying" and "doing"' in such a way as to suggest that 'from the way history misunderstood itself stemmed the performance of revolution—or historical practice' (107). The Marxist aesthetics thus far discussed—with particular emphasis on negativity or de-contextualising force of history—will no doubt indicate some crucial possibilities of recovery from the still hegemonic Post-New Historicist conservatism and conformism.

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