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The Recirculation of Negativity: Theory, Literature, and the Failures of Affirmation

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Abstract

The contemporary theoretical moment is dominated by “affirmationism,” as the affirming of a superior economy of excess that can inscribe and rupture any actual economy. This article reconstructs and critiques this affirmationism through an analysis of how it subordinates negativity as trapped within a restricted economy, and insists on a “savage negativity” that escapes all relation. I do so by retracing the core features of affirmationism and particularly its turn to the forces of creativity and play, figured through literature, posed against the “labor of the negative.” Probing this downgrading of “labor,” as a result of the collapse of worker’s identity, I suggest that it results in a fatal detachment of negativity from any political or social instantiation. Instead, the return to negativity must be a return to the possible relational forms of negativity that attend to the impossibility of labor within capitalism.

Keywords

affirmation, contemporary continental theory, labor, negativity, politics.

The Exit Door Leads In

I want to begin with an ending (which is also a beginning) and a beginning (which is also an ending). First, the ending is the last word of James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), which is "Yes" (capitalized), the final "yes" of a sequence of yeses in Molly Bloom's soliloquy: "yes I said yes I will Yes" (Joyce 1994: 933). It is this "yes," this repeated "yes," from which Derrida will derive the "double affirmation" that is the beginning of deconstruction as an opening to the event (Derrida 1992: 253–309). Second, the beginning is from Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* (1939), a beginning which completes the Viconian circle of the book and is looped back from the last word "the" to the first line: "riverrun, past Eve and Adam's, from swerve of shore to bend of bay, brings us by a commodius vicus of recirculation back to Howth Castle and Environs" (Joyce 1992: 3). This "recirculation" would seem to imply a closed circle, a recapturing and totalization that, in Derrida's words, "circulates through all languages at once, [and] accumulates their energies" (1989: 102). In this endless accumulation without reserve it seems Joyce's textual machine becomes a *perpetuum mobile*. Yet, Derrida argues that we recirculate between the "yes" of "recapitulative control and reactive repetition" (Derrida 1992: 308), and the "yes" of affirmation and opening. The *doubling* of "yes" breaks the circle and opens a spiral of affirmation.

This "double scene," which tellingly is *literary*, is one of the "primal scenes" of what I have called "affirmationism"—that emphasis on novelty, production, excess, and the fundamentally *affirmative* nature of thought (Noys 2010: xi). In this schema, as we will see, the recourse to affirmation is made to break up any "restricted economy" of circulation and totalization by inscribing it within a "general economy" of excess (Derrida 2001: 317–350). From the perspective of "restricted economy," negativity is what remains within a circle, remains bound to what is, and can never accede to creation and the new; negativity is always only the "reassuring *other* surface of the positive" (Derrida 2001: 328). "General economy" is the perspective that traces a spiral that does not simply abandon negativity to this fate, but re-inscribes it; negativity is transfigured into "a negativity so negative that it could not even be called such any longer" (Derrida 2001: 391, n. 4), which we could call a "savage negativity."

This scene of affirmationism is a repeated one across the conjuncture of contemporary theory and links together theoretical forms that initially seem antagonistic and mutually hostile—from Derrida to Deleuze, Negri to Badiou, and beyond. Rather than the exhaustive delimitation of this scene—a task I have undertaken elsewhere (Noys 2010)—I aim here to probe affirmationism as a particular philosophico-*literary* scene or moment. In particular, I wish to problematize this scene through an interrogation of its downgrading of negativity to the merely economic, and its

concomitant reification of a hyper-negativity. At the root of this double maneuver is, I will argue, an anxiety concerning the role and form of *labor* as the once privileged figure of negativity. In response to the seeming failure of labor to incarnate a disruptive negativity, “affirmationism” aligns itself with the literary as the site of creativity and play detached from the forms of capitalist economy and value. I argue that this detachment figures and mediates the tendency to regard labor as a failed counter-form to capital, but that this detachment, ironically, serves to reconnect “savage negativity” to the creation of value: the exit door leads in.

Joyce’s Spiral and Hegel’s Circle

The figure that stands behind Joyce and his textual machine is, for Derrida, Hegel; and it is the reaction *against* Hegel that structures the general scene of affirmationism. The desire to find a superior economy of excess is the desire to exceed the Hegelian “circle,” which is always taken as the restraint of negativity¹. Derrida inscribes Joyce’s excessive “spiral” of affirmation as the excess of Hegel’s restricted “circle” of negativity. If, as Derrida notes, there is “ever so little literature” (1992: 73), that most literature, we could say, is saturated by philosophy, and if any literature remains it is only as a remainder, then Joyce is the philosophical double of Hegel, but with that remainder, that “recirculation” or “riverrun” of affirmation that overflows from any *perpetuum mobile*. It is telling that one of the earliest examples of such a perpetual motion machine, that of Villard de Honnecourt from about 1230, was a water wheel (see Figure 1).

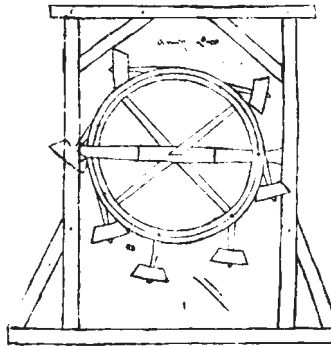


Figure 1: Perpetuum Mobile of Villard de Honnecourt (circa 1230)

¹ In contrast, Jean-Luc Nancy argues that the “circle” in Hegel is a privileged figure, but only as “the circle of circles,” which forms a “turning point” and an unending restlessness (2002: 17–18).

We should also note that it is literature, as this tiny margin of excess, which figures affirmationism. Joyce's machine, true to his name, is joyous, comic, and affirmative, beginning from a desire to totalize everything, all the languages of the world, only always to end with an equivocal affirmation that always displaces and exacerbates that desire (Derrida 1984); Hegel's machine only ever begins from negativity, operating through the tragic and a certain form of mourning, to return, through "the negation of the negation," to totality. Negativity, it is presumed, is saturated in its closure, with absolute negativity equivalent to the interiorization of absolute knowledge, a recirculation that does not and cannot, it is assumed, overflow its channeling. Literature, in contrast, overflows. Joyce, then, is the figure of hyperbolic affirmationism. Embedded in the theoretical sophistication is the cliché of the mournful philosopher and the joyous and creative writer. In our moment this affirmationism takes on the "popular" form of the ideology of creativity, which always and everywhere insists on the overflowing powers of creativity against the strictures of the critical and the constraints of the market.

In regards to Joyce, the construction of his "joyous" image involves the neglect of the *paralysis* probed in *Dubliners* (1914). Instead, we have the Joyce of the affirmative "line of flight," who precisely aims to "fly by those nets" of paralysis (bad negativity) and so accede to the nomadic and endless affirmation of a-national and rhizomatic immanence. This construction is mocked in advance by Flann O'Brien's comic, and malicious, portrait of a retired James Joyce living secretly in post-war Ireland in *The Dalkey Archive* (1964). This "Joyce" claims only to have co-written *Dubliners* with Oliver Gogarty and a series of pamphlets for the Catholic Truth Society of Ireland. He violently disavows the "[p]ornography and filth and literary vomit" (O'Brien 1993: 167) of *Ulysses*, which he claims was the result of plot by Sylvia Beach and was not written by him but by a cabal of [m]uck-rakers, obscene poets, carnal pimps, sodomous sycophants, pedlars of the colored lusts of fallen humanity" (O'Brien 1993: 167). Finally, he has no knowledge at all of *Finnegans Wake*. Far from the international modernist, Joyce is reduced to the parochial and local "paralysis" his image was constructed to contest, not a man of "silence, exile, and cunning" but "the garrulous, the repatriate, the ingenuous" (O'Brien 1993: 168).

The affirmationist disavowal of any negativity in Joyce allows him to be turned against Hegel. In this way, literature can serve a detachment from philosophy or, to be more precise, a detachment from a certain form of philosophy that "restricts" negativity, and the opening of a new form of philosophy that affirms a "general economy." The result is the opening of a "front" or "war" on Hegel that opposes the dialectical circle to the affirmative spiral. Whereas, it is claimed, Hegelian negativity is always a "labor of the negative" that stabilizes difference in contradiction, we are driven to an affirmation that frees from this labor the negativity Hegel restricts as "abstract" (Derrida 2001: 330). In this schema, the literary is

designated as the form of affirmation in its “pure” state, before the compromises of philosophy.

Beckett’s Beautiful Soul

The “war” on the dialectic (as motor of negativity) is a guerrilla war that strikes not only at the strongest point of the chain but also at the weakest points, ambushing Hegel’s text in its various “figurations” of negativity. The “form” I want to select for examination is that of the “beautiful soul,” which “lives in dread of besmirching the purity of its inner being by action and an existence” and so “flees from contact with the actual world” (Hegel 1977: 400). Of course, from Hegel’s point of view the “beautiful soul” is the classic example of the failure to accede to negativity, i.e., action, in the world. This refusal to negate makes it a disposition of “empty nothingness” which is “disordered to the point of madness, [and] wastes itself in yearning and pines away in consumption” (Hegel 1977: 207). And yet, if dialectical negativity *qua* action is correlated with an unacceptable limitation on negativity, the “inner disorder” of the “beautiful soul” can be reversed into the preservation of an intractable and unobliterated negativity. What for Hegel is only “interior” becomes, in this reading, a hemorrhaging of negativity.

At the moment when negativity idles or, in Bataille’s formulation (and valorization), appears as “unemployed” (Bataille 1988), the constraints of negativity in action are refused. Drew Milne has noted that, in relation to Samuel Beckett’s fictional re-tooling of the beautiful soul, “The process is dynamic, but the dynamism animating this process moves between the vanity of minor differences and absolute indifference, refusing to become dialectical or to recognize its negativity as a process of determinate negations” (Milne 2002: 78). In Beckett’s fiction, per Milne’s reading, negativity is “recognized” as what cannot ever be sublated fully into action, hence the “actionless” nature of delay and prevarication that seems to haunt his works. It is the dialectical *indetermination* of the “beautiful soul,” treated as a failure by Hegel, which opens a potential rupture in the dialectic to locate a perpetual negativity of failure². What the figure of the “beautiful soul” offers is the disarticulation of negativity from labor and action, its reinscription in terms of the affirmation of negativity itself, beyond “economic” coordination, or only in a superior economy of *play*.

The difficulty remains, however, of the pejorative status of the “beautiful soul” from within Hegelianism. For Hegel, the “beautiful soul” is “the

² This deployment of the “beautiful soul,” and the related figure of the “unhappy consciousness” as figures of “unemployed negativity,” is made by Paul de Man and, in a different fashion, by T.J. Clark (see Day 2010: 65, 171–172).

one-sided shape which we saw vanish into thin air, but also positively externalize itself and move onward” (Hegel 1977: 483). Without this externalization and realization the “beautiful soul” would remain “objectless” and “one-sided.” From within Hegelianism, the “beautiful soul” is accounted for, and to remain at this point amounts to a regression *within* the dialectic. The valorization of this regression therefore risks, even if couched in the affirmation of a hyper-negativity, remaining enfolded within the dialectic, accounted in advance within the “economy” of negativity. As Milne rightly notes, our skepticism or indifference to the achievement of absolute knowledge threatens to leave us “remaining restless within the literary and philosophical shape of Spirit represented by the beautiful soul[?]” (2002: 81). This troubling position would seem to leave us without a means for intervention into the world, leaving us unable to accede to any “labor of the negative” and so merely in impotent contemplation of “restless” or “unemployed” negativity.

Of course, it is the very “uselessness” of this kind of negativity that leads to its valorization by affirmationism. Hence, we have the perpetual circle of exchanged accusations in which Hegel or Hegelians can reply that this “uselessness” is merely consolatory and, precisely, “useless” in the bad sense, while affirmationists argue that the economy of “use” merely reproduces a philosophical capitalization on negativity that reproduces capitalist value extraction. While the affirmationist valorization of the inactive and the inoperative tries to assert the affirmative and positive dislocation of radicalized negativity (Agamben, 2000), it attracts the Hegelian rejoinder that this is merely the celebration of artistic and political failure or, perhaps worse, the celebration of an artistic and creative exceptionalism that feeds the circuits of capitalist accumulation.

Breaking the Circle

It was Deleuze who had taken account of exactly this risk. Commenting on the necessity of abandoning the sharpness of the dialectical contradiction for the play of differences, he notes that “the philosophy of difference must be wary of turning into the discourse of beautiful souls: differences, nothing but differences, in a peaceful coexistence in the Idea of social places and functions” (Deleuze 1994: 207). To avoid this fate, Deleuze asserts, we require the “proper degree of *positivity*” to release “a power of aggression and selection” (1994: xviii). This is exemplary of the strategic necessity that dictates the linking of a thought of affirmation together with a thinking of negativity detached from dialectical circulation. The thought of difference *requires* affirmation and positivity if it is not to sink into acceptance of “things as they are” or into a mere plurality of pacified differences. In alliance with positivity we find a savage negativity, “a power of aggression,” which can never be stabilized.

Hence Deleuze's fear, an anxiety I share, is that the abandonment of the dialectic will only lead to its replacement by "respectable, reconcilable or federative differences" (Deleuze 1994: 52). In the case of Deleuze, this fear leads to a constant insistence on the affirmative, on the "proper degree of positivity," as the only means to break the circle of constrained negativity. The result is that every case or suspicion of negativity must be eliminated. This is most evident in Deleuze's account of art and literature, where any sign of morbidity or negativity in an artist or writer is regarded as our own failure to properly register their truly affirmative function. So, we find Deleuze attracted to the radical re-reading of oeuvres we might usually regard as "negative": Kafka (Deleuze and Guattari 1986), Beckett (Deleuze 1995), Francis Bacon (Deleuze 2005), and so on. In each of his readings, "negativity" is reversed into affirmation, precisely to exclude any trace of a form of difference that would become mired in the "weakness" of negativity as such. In this way, Deleuze redeems difference from any correlation with the "beautiful soul," taken as an internalizing figure of negativity.

Exactly the same power of the creative operates in the political domain, which is again defined by the exclusion of any negativity. In this case, Deleuze codes revolution as the breaking with negativity in the name of "the social power of difference, the paradox of society, the particular wrath of the social idea" (Deleuze 1994: 208). What we can again see is that the power of difference is associated with "wrath," with a rage that refuses a stabilized difference for an affirmative difference. What haunts Deleuze's project, an anxiety that has only increased in the current conjuncture, is the problem of "the counterfeit forms of affirmation" (Deleuze 1994: 208). Hence the repetitive task of Deleuzian reading is to constantly insist on the elimination of traces of negativity, and so it implies that affirmation cannot be stabilized into capitalist forms. He does so by linking artistic works and political activity to a superior economy of *production*. The reiterated argument is that this superior production, which can incorporate negativity as "anti-production," always deterritorializes beyond the limited deterritorialization of capital, which only ever posits its own limit (Deleuze and Guattari 1983).

To maintain this integral affirmation and its corollary of a savage negativity, requires the insistence on the *consistency* of alterity. This consistent affirmative alterity can never return to being relational, but must always remain reflexive to itself, whether in Deleuze's "transcendental field," Derrida's *différance*, Negri's dispersion of singularities or, in a perhaps more dubious characterization, Badiou's "event." The attention to the moment of the "beautiful soul" demonstrates this kind of deployment, as alterity is there internalized in resistance to any compromise with the world, and is pushed to action through the further affirmation of "wrath." Such affirmationism is, in the terms developed by Peter Hallward (2003), radically *singular* and non-relational. Negativity, in the usual

“bad” sense, is characterized as relational, and hence never escaping from restricted economies. In contrast to the compromises of philosophy and economy, literature, or certain forms and elements of literature, is called on to embody this infinite singular power.

Circuits of Capitalism

In the end, the final perpetual motion machine is *capitalism*. For affirmationism, the “dialectic” of capital is taken as a dialectic that “integrates” difference, that operates through negativity, to organize the reproduction of capitalism. Contrary to the dialectic being a weapon *against* capitalism, it now *embodies* capitalism. Deploying the Deleuzo-Guattarian couplet deterritorialization-reterritorialization, negativity (in its usual form) is aligned with reterritorialization and recapture of the fundamentally positive forces of deterritorialization. Negativity is taken as the motor of capital and the device of recirculation to the benefit of accumulation. In this way, Hegel’s logic is capital’s logic, and the “labor of the negative” is assimilated to the extraction of value from labor by capital. The philosophical machine—with Hegel as its figure par excellence—is identified with the capitalist machine. In this alignment labor serves capital and we must go elsewhere for a radicalized and affirmed negativity—embracing creativity, production, and play as alternative schemas of a savage negativity that breaks the capitalist circuit of value. It is a *separation* from the circuit of value that affirmationism claims, in the name of this infinite power.

What is left after the separation of this savage power of negativity, recoded as affirmation, are the mere remains of a bound and relational negativity. This takes two forms: the mere suffering of the mortal human body, and explosive and “nihilist” acts of violence. This is, I would suggest, a double reification: the reification of an infinite singular power of negativity and the reification of a relational “failed” negativity. On the other hand, in response to this “heroic tone” (Critchley 1999) of redeemed negativity, we witness the valorization of “weak” negativity as possible point of resistance. Inspired by Levinasian and post-deconstructive accounts of our passivity before the Other, and Adorno’s insistence on the disjuncture between our “damaged life” and late capitalism, this mode of thinking sutures negativity to the *incapacity* of the subject (Critchley 2007; Critchley 2012). In this schema, negativity is retained and valorized as our finitude and failure, our comic condition, as the sign of our evasion of capture by capitalism. In fact, however, it is only the mirror of the forms of high affirmationism. The reference to the infinite Other inscribes an incapacity that affirms itself as always beyond any mere relation to capital, or between humans. This is another ontological politics, not driven by an ontology of production or construction, but by an ontology of division—

again, we can see this as another variant of the recovery of the “beautiful soul.” In this way, we might speak of a “soft affirmationism,” which blunts the heroic tone of ontological power, but retains the necessity to affirm even weakness by some transcendent reference.

This symmetry can be demonstrated by the common sites in which these “competing” formulations articulate themselves. The first is that of the writing of Beckett, the current replacement for Joyce as *the* leading modernist adopted by theory³. Beckett suits the contemporary taste for an inexhaustible negativity, and fulfills this function for both forms of affirmationism. We witness an interpretive competition over whether Beckett’s “negativity” has the pathos of failure (Gibson 2006) or whether it reinscribes itself within a generic capacity for human patience and courage (Badiou 2003). The extremity of Beckett’s negativity, as we saw with Milne’s discussion, makes him *the* figure from which to extract a negativity that (supposedly) cannot be correlated to capitalism or existent artistic formations. Despite Milne’s cautions, Beckett becomes valorized as a figure of hyperbolic or savage negativity. This can be taken in the form of “minor” negativity that escapes “beneath” capitalist valorization or the “major” form of negativity that exceeds the circuit of capitalist valorization.

In a parallel, we can also see that comedy is another site of this competition, which is often linked to Beckett. The contest here is between comedy as deflationary strategy of political subversion (Critchley 1999), and comedy as a tracing of infinity (Zupančič 2008). The desire to avoid the “tragic,” in dialectical terms, becomes an embrace of a comic that exceeds the negativity. In the case of Alenka Zupančič’s work, however, this is disrupted by her careful tracing and reconstruction of the comic as central to Hegelian discourse (Zupančič 2008). In this way, she is one of the few contemporary thinkers trying to evade the false choice between the pathos of weak negativity and the pathos of high affirmationism. This case, however, is only the exception that proves the general rule.

What I have traced is a recirculation, a vicious circle even, between affirmation — savage negativity — weak negativity — and affirmation. We can start at different points on the circle, but still seem only to permute the terms. We could begin, like Simon Critchley, from the weak negativity of the suffering body to return to the affirmation of absolute alterity or, like Badiou, subsume any weakness of the body under the affirmation of a generic procedure of fidelity to the event. Of course, this circle is only hegemonic, and the question then is of the desire to *break* this circle. This circle, as I have intimated, is also a *political* circle—no matter how skeptical we might be concerning the reality of such a politics, or the political

³ As we have seen, Joyce is the key figure for Derrida’s articulations, and he was also central for Lacan (2005).

claims made for “difference” or “affirmation,” the stakes of affirmationism always insist on the political stakes of a rupture with negativity; of course, the “settling of accounts” with Hegel, who radically implicated philosophy in actuality, plays a key role here. Hegel is taken as *the* philosopher of actuality, which is to say the misery of contemporary (capitalist) actuality. What has been lost is Marx’s faith that the dialectic could be returned to a “rational” form: a “scandal and abomination to bourgeoisdom” that both recognizes “the existing state of things” and recognizes “the negation of that state,” and is “in its essence critical and revolutionary” (Marx 1991).

Instead, we are returned to clichés of Hegel as “state philosopher,” which permeates the quasi-anarchist affirmationist opposition to what Deleuze and Guattari call “state thinking” in contemporary thought (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 361–374). Allied to this, as we have seen, the assimilation of the dialectic to capitalism closes the circle from the other, Marxist, side: the dialectic is powered by negativity and so the state and capital are mirrored in the dialectic; therefore, negativity is subordinated to the function(ing) of the state and capitalism. We could argue that in this conception the state/capital play the role of reflexivity, the return of negativity into an interiorization. Capital becomes “subject,” as the formation of negativity harnessed to the production of value. Against the integration of negativity, affirmationism posits an integral negativity that brooks no compromise with the “circle” of the dialectic. It is the “broken” dialectic, the “broken” promise of the imbrications of rationality and actuality, which fuels the detachment of negativity into “total alterity,” and the primacy of affirmation as point of ontological or eventual resistance.

In this situation, the rehabilitation of negativity itself struggles with any “relational” orientation, because any negativity of relation is assimilated to this schema, which results in the tendency to position negativity itself as absolutely singular—either in the extreme forms of alterity, or even when accepted or valorized as such, linked to the singular *subject* (again, the figure of the beautiful soul is crucial). This figuration often, although not exclusively, takes place through the *literary* subject: it is literature that incarnates the resistant space of integral and savage negativity, in a trope that runs from Blanchot to the current moment. The “infinite” power of literature figures an excess over any mere restriction of value. Within the order of the political, the “subject” of alterity is collectivized into various “meta-subjects”: the “multitude,” “bare life,” the “infinite Other,” etc. Again, these “subjects” lie in excess of the delimitation of capitalist subjectivity—centrally, the figure of the “worker.” The literary and the political conjoin in this affirmation of creativity, whether that is taken as an affirmative force, as in Deleuze, or as a reserve of weakness that ruins any political program, as in Gibson (2012). The symmetry of these articulations turns on the disenchantment with *mediation*, especially the mediation of labor, and a desire for the *immediate* as the immediate figuration of resistance.

Totalizing Labor

Beyond the clichés used to characterize Hegel or Marx, I would suggest that much here turns on the perception of *labor*, which is the classical model of negativity as relation. Here I want to make some preliminary remarks concerning the problems with the unequivocal affirmatist identification of labor with limited and constrained negativity. It is, I would argue, the failure of negativity as instantiated in labor that releases the new models of artistic creativity and play as the social forms that might incarnate an affirmative economy. In fact, we could track this “turn” and the emergence of these signifiers as political signs of the post-1973 collapse of organized labor as even a residual incarnation of negativity. Such formulations gain resonance, but remain problematic. We find the equivocation of “play” and “creativity” as they become embedded in certain (limited, it is true) forms of contemporary labor (Boltanski and Chiapello 2007). We also find that the abandonment of labor as a theoretical or metaphysical category can lead to an inattention to labor as a social or political form, or the desire to transform it that offers little close attention to its structure and functions.

Of course the identification of labor with a constrained negativity gains license in Hegel, through his perspectival shifting of “tarrying with the negative” into the “labor of the concept” (Hegel 1977: 10), and also through Bataille’s breaking with Hegel and this constraint through the formula of “unemployed negativity” (Bataille 1988). Bataille, in this schema, would form the proto-affirmationist rejoinder to Hegelian labor through his own metaphysics of “play.” This identification, however, is also vectored through social reality and politics, in terms of the generalized suspicion that labor does not form a counter category to capital, but remains dialectically tied to capital.

What this suspicion attests to is this disenchantment with labor *qua* negativity and the desire to re-enchant a force of superior creativity. If, in the “revolutionary” workers’ movements of the early twentieth century, labor and negativity seemed conjoined in radical action, which could later be tracked through anti-colonial movements and other “resistance” movements, this “compact” seems broken. The degradation of this conjunction leads to a repeated search for alternative forms that could break the deadlock of a labor locked into capitalism—the various “farewells” to the proletariat as force of revolutionary negation, and the various proposed candidates for the role of radical negation. In the affirmationist moment, this modeling is reversed. Rather than the search for new poles of radical negativity, somehow “outside” of the capitalist relation, the situation is one which correlates negativity to the inertia of labor bound to capitalism as its “internal opposition,” while positivity incarnates an immanent and self-contained force of rupture. The valences are reversed, and in response to the “totalization” of capitalism we witness a probing of

positivity as absolute immanence, a figural force of rupture at once “within and against” capitalism.

In terms of the conflicts and realignments emergent from 1968 and the capitalist crisis of 1973, we can suggest what emerges is an affirmative incarnation of positivity in the new modes of struggle, coupled to a longer drift of anxiety at the failure and recuperation of these alternatives. While “play power” seemed subversive, now it seems to serve the circuits of value accumulation that require our affective and “joyous” labor. It is Beckett rather than Joyce who is to the taste of our moment precisely because his work captures the ambiguity of the duration of defeat without recomposition. In this way, he can be mined as a source of affirmative rearticulations, and as a signal expression of the difficulty of holding on in the experience of capitalism as total horizon. Beckett’s sobriety stands, in this kind of reading, against the totalization of Joyce. While Derrida played Joyce against the totalization of Hegel, now the characterization is of Joyce as figure of totalizing and “joyous” capture; which is to say, of *capitalism*. The Joycean textual machine appears as the mega-machine of capital, while Beckett’s subtractive asceticism figures the disenchantment with “joyous” play, associated with the variants of post-structuralism, and the need to discover a truly integral and irrecuperable savage negativity.

In that sense, we could say, there is something laborious about Joyce’s playfulness, which is what makes him the figure of the recuperation of play. This point was presciently made by Deleuze and Guattari, when they argued that:

But the former [Joyce] never stops operating by exhilaration and over-termination and brings about all sorts of reterritorializations. The other [Beckett] proceeds by dryness and sobriety, a willed poverty, pushing deterritorialization to such an extreme that nothing remains except intensities. (1987: 19)

It is this symmetry that shapes the present deployment of literature within the theoretical field. I have no wish to take sides in this dispute or to question the accuracy of these characterizations (which could certainly be done). I am, instead, pointing to the ideological use of literature to incarnate the loss of faith in relational negativity.

I would also suggest that such symmetry indicates a radical constriction of the canon of literature in terms of the articulations of theory. The constant recourse to Joyce and Beckett as figures, carried out in the name of affirmative novelty, ironically blocks any considerations of potential “novelty” in the current conjuncture. What we witness is a certain allergy to the thinking of “literary” possibilities that might engage with the “relational” imbrications of the forms of labor, including the labor of literary production itself. To take only one instance, we might note the neglect within the domain of theory of the persistent production of

“political poetry,” and the interrogation of what this might mean, within what might be called “neo-modernist poetry.” To cite only some possible figures, we could consider the work of Keston Sutherland, Sean Bonney, and a range of other contemporary poets, in the “direct” interrogation of the commodity form that might structure poetic and literary “value.” This is merely one possible path, and I would suggest the necessity of theory to engage far more widely with both past and present experiments or, to be more accurate, the wider recognition and discussion of such attempts.

The projection of “heroic” modernism as a closed sequence, or even an anti-heroic modernism, serves the purpose of reserving a force of affirmation located somehow “beyond” the horizon of capitalist dominance. This displacement creates an alignment of the pathos of affirmation with the “revolutionary” moments of literary production and creates an elision between politics and literature. On the one hand, this collapses and flattens the configuration of “modernism,” and not least the different political forces and effects involved in that configuration. On the other hand, it prevents any consideration of the present engagements and relations between the political and the literary, which become flattened out into an attenuated “postmodernism.” Again, the irony is that while constant invoking the value of affirmation, this type of thinking often *condemns* the present. It tries to excavate another value or force that could contest this present in the name of affirmative forces, but cannot consider in a meaningful fashion the continuing imbrication of the literary and the political, especially in regards to the commodity and the economic. The rightful hostility to the commodified world of capitalism is mistranslated into a desire beyond the commodity that cannot consider the form of the commodity, and not least the central commodity of labor.

Moving Contradiction

Any reconsideration of labor and relational negativity does not imply a simple revalorization of labor. It is not a matter of the return to what we could call “social-democratic theory,” which would have labor as its placeholder. The various failures and constraints of “social-democratic” forms, as well as some of their limited successes in decommodification, need to be critically analyzed in regards to the place of labor. The contemporary situation attests to the continued ideological deployment of labor, now often coded through austerity and sacrifice, as well as the structural *impossibility* of labor within the experience of capitalism⁴. This is to note

⁴ One of the best reflections on this situation, attuned to the limits of labor but also the difficulties of a counter-discourse, is Franco Barchiesi’s analysis of labor in contemporary South Africa (Barchiesi 2011).

that affirmationism responds to a real problem, and its responses are not simply false. One of the central elements of the negativity of labor, I would say, is precisely its impossibility within the framework of capitalism. This was well captured in Marx's remarks on the contradictory existence of labor as both "the *living source* of value," and "*not-value*" or "*absolute poverty*" (Marx 1973: 296). The tendency of affirmationism is to try and break this contradiction by the valorization, beyond labor, of the sense of the "living source," hence the popularity of various forms of neovitalism in the current conjuncture. Literature, I have suggested, is one of the sites that figures this "living source." The choice of Beckett, however, suggests the awareness of the continued miring effects of the contradictory experience of capitalism that resists any arrival of Godot.

The difficulty is, however, both political and literary (if they can be separated, which I doubt). In the case of the political, there is nothing to be faulted with the search for alternative counterpoints to the dominance of capitalism, except that these often take forms detached from social actuality⁵. The condemnation of the present as atonal and eventless registers a certain truth, but inflates that truth into a metaphysics that occludes the present. We are encouraged to an abandonment of labor at the same point in which capitalism is engaged in such an abandonment, and with little consideration of how the contestation of the "impossibility" of labor under capitalism might be translated into the possibility of an alternative and more just social order. At the same time, the claims made for affirmative and infinite power replicate the capitalist fantasy of a "reserve" of ever-exploitable labor power. Casting this "reserve" in literary form condenses the difficulties. The detachment of "intensities" beyond capture resists, once again, the more difficult questions of literary practice in the present. It risks valorizing the "reserve" of creativity that serves to construct another figuration of value extraction.

My claim is, admittedly and deliberately, modest. While not disavowing the ways in which "affirmationism" has articulated and persisted in maintaining a critical and political discourse through some of the worst times, I believe the acceptance of the correlations on which it depends need more careful thinking through. This is also not to deny that affirmationism itself provides many of the resources for this thinking through. What is true, however, is that the knee-jerk gesture that condemns any "relational" forms of negativity is one that, finally, refuses engagement in actuality. To simply declare, by fiat, all relation as constrained and delimited, is to refuse any strategic thinking at all. What I am arguing is that

⁵ This abandonment of actuality and acceptance of the radical rarity of the event is given in the most extreme anti-Marxist and "negative" form in Andrew Gibson's *Intermittency* (2012), which then stands as the symptomatic work of this configuration.

persistence, today, has to take the form not of a repetition of affirmation but of a rethinking of negativity.

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