

# Negative Hermeneutics and the Notion of Literary Science

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*The meaning of negativity within the context of interpretative practices is likely to unravel, thus manifesting different or even divergent heuristic strategies. However, these have been equivocally referred to as negative hermeneutics, an expression that occurs in the discourse of authors such as Ricœur and Jameson. This “negative,” either challenging or complementing “positive” hermeneutics, has consequences for the thought of “literary science,” if there is such a thing and such a possibility.*

Key words: literary criticism / literary interpretation / hermeneutics

Translated into English in 1970 as *Freud and Philosophy*, Paul Ricœur’s *De l’interprétation: Essai sur Freud* was originally published in 1965, making him the first author to formulate the hermeneutical split in two diverse attitudes towards meaning. Ricœur writes:

According to one pole, hermeneutics is understood as the manifestation and restoration of a meaning addressed to me in the manner of a message, a proclamation or as is sometimes said, a kerygma; according to the other pole, it is understood as a demystification, as a reduction of illusion . . . Hermeneutics seems to me to be animated by this double motivation: willingness to suspect, willingness to listen; vow of rigor, vow of obedience. (26–27)

A hermeneutics characterized by the “willingness to suspect” is recognized in Nietzschean philosophy, which alone is capable of conferring authority on his *negative hermeneutics*, remains buried under the ruins that Nietzsche has accumulated around him. It is doubtful whether anyone can live on the level of Zarathustra. Nietzsche himself, the man with the hammer, is not the superman that he proclaims. His aggression against Christianity remains caught up in the attitude of resentment; the rebel is not, and cannot be, at the same level as the prophet. (*The Conflict of Interpretations* 447, my emphasis)

Negative hermeneutics is a formulation whose fortune has not yet been analyzed. This paper seeks to provide a critical account of the most relevant occurrences of that phrase in the critical discourse, and also aims to consider its consequences for the notion of literary science. Early in the 1970s, Fredric Jameson made a Marxist use of this distinction:

We must ... distinguish between what Paul Ricœur has called negative and positive hermeneutics, between the hermeneutics of suspicion and the hermeneutics of a restoration of some original, forgotten meaning, between hermeneutic as demystification, as the destruction of illusions, and a hermeneutic which offers renewed access to some essential source of life. For Ricœur, of course, the latter cannot be imagined as anything other than the *sacred*, so that the only form of positive hermeneutic of which he is able to conceive remains an essentially religious one. Negative hermeneutic, on the other hand, is at one with modern philosophy itself, with those critiques of ideology and illusory consciousness which we find in Nietzsche and in Marx, in Freud . . . (*Marxism and Form* 119–20)

The willingness to suspect is therefore recovered as a necessary weapon against ideology (according to Jameson, Ricœur's would be a religious ideology). A reviewer of *Marxism and Form* correctly points to the relation between these hermeneutical modes and the thought of positivity – and negativity:

Following Ricœur he makes an illuminating distinction between two different strategies, a negative or reductive "hermeneutic of suspicion" which unmasks conservative ideology, and a positive or expansive "hermeneutic of restoration" which discovers some original, progressive meaning in the reified tradition (p.119 [*Marxism and Form*]). This could teach some radical critics the real difference between the power of positive and negative thinking. (Osterle 662)

However, Jameson later criticizes positive hermeneutics such as Northrop Frye's<sup>1</sup> so as to argue for the necessity of positive and negative hermeneutics coexisting within a Marxist framework of ideological analysis:

Frye's is in this sense a "positive" hermeneutic which tends to filter out historical difference and the radical discontinuity of modes of production and of their cultural expressions. A negative hermeneutic, then, would on the contrary wish to use the narrative raw material shared by myth and "historical" literatures to sharpen our sense of historical difference, and to stimulate an increasingly vivid apprehension of what happens when plot falls into history, so to speak, and enters the force fields of the modern societies. (*The Political Unconscious* 130)

[A] Marxist negative hermeneutic, a Marxist practice of ideological analysis proper, must in the practical work of reading and interpretation be exercised *simultaneously* with a Marxist positive hermeneutic, or a decipherment of the Utopian impulses of these same still ideological cultural texts. (*The Political Unconscious* 296)

Cornel West, to whom "Jameson rightly considers poststructuralism an ally against bourgeois humanism yet ultimately an intellectual foe and political enemy" because "deconstructions conceal the political impotency of their projects" (179), recognizes a father figure behind his thought, "a negative hermeneutical thinker, a dialectical deconstructionist *par excel-*

lence ...”: Theodor Adorno, who disbelieves and dismisses the possibility of expressing reality through language:

The means employed in negative dialectics for the penetration of its hardened objects is possibility – the possibility of which their reality has cheated the objects and which is nonetheless visible in each one. But no matter how hard we try for linguistic expression of such a history congealed in things, the words we use will remain concepts. Their precision substitutes for the thing itself, without quite bringing its selfhood to mind; there is a gap between words and the thing they conjure. Hence, the residue of arbitrariness and relativity in the choice of words as well as in the presentation as a whole. (*Negative Dialectics* 52–53)

This principle later informs the notions of indeterminacy and undecidability through a translation of semiotic arbitrariness (“in the choice of words”) into hermeneutic negativity, meaning that an interpretation is an intrinsically imperfect process – given that meaning, as Derrida would say, is always deferred. Although Adorno considers language within the context of a thought of negativity, the scope of his analysis is not mainly literary, as is the case for Derrida and Iser and, to a lesser extent, for American deconstructionists such as Paul de Man (according to W.J.T. Mitchell<sup>2</sup>) or Geoffrey Hartman,<sup>3</sup> but instead political:

Experience forbids the resolution in the unity of conscience of whatever appears contradictory. For instance, a contradiction like the one between the definition which an individual knows as his own and his “role,” the definition forced upon him by society when he would make his living – such a contradiction cannot be brought under any unity without manipulation, without the insertion of some wretched cover concepts that will make the crucial differences vanish. (152)

Adorno’s thought of negativity sends one back to Hegel’s *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, in which affiliation to a notion of the particular (subject) as negativity is to be found.<sup>4</sup> However, reading it carefully, a question may come to disturb that possible affiliation: is Hegel’s concept of the negative determined by a will to understand the subject as negativity through what Bloom would call an “intentional misreading” of negative theology? This cannot be known for sure, but it should be noted that for Hegel, concepts and the things they refer to are fundamentally different, and the only possibility of identification is mutual negation, so that their identities are in fact negativities.<sup>5</sup> Negation therefore inevitably undermines the positivity of reason.

This manner of thinking is noticeably reminiscent of Neo-Platonism and its Gnostic developments – with which negative theology is often mistakenly confused – by way of the hermetic drift of meanings referred to

by Umberto Eco. Moreover, the influence of German speculative thinkers akin to Gnostic mysticisms could be admitted.<sup>6</sup> Hegel challenges theological canons of thought in many of his assumptions, such as the superiority of art over nature in his *Aesthetics*. This revolutionary mode of resistance (i.e., negation) is also present in the theory of negativity that Hegel unfolds in *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, which is reworked by neo-Marxist and deconstructionist authors. This theory could be described as a discourse about a negatively defining feature of subjectivity, whose *affirmation* would lie on the negation of or resistance to a “universal” or positive totality (hegemonic, as Antonio Gramsci says<sup>7</sup>).

Nevertheless, the relation of the concept of negativity to the hermeneutical practice and thus the very notion of negative hermeneutics in contemporary critical thought is arguably influenced by the tradition known as negative theology, whose apophatic precept was formulated at least as early as the 5th century by the anonymous Syrian author of *Mystical Theology* known as the Pseudo Dionysius: knowing through unknowing, being illuminated by a “ray of darkness.”<sup>8</sup> The tripartite scheme of this *pedagogy* – the way children are led – to God may help understand how deconstruction came to an aporetic understanding of negative hermeneutics: there is cataphasis, positive saying, which some may parallel to positive hermeneutics; apophasis, negative saying or saying through denying; and apharesis or the overcoming of denial itself (and therefore of positivity and negativity). After having read *Mystical Theology*, one cannot avoid reading Derrida’s “How to Avoid Speaking: Denegations” as a parody of apophatic theology.<sup>9</sup>

Before considering Derrida’s concept of negativity (if there is *one*), another contribution to this brief survey of the meanings of negative hermeneutics is worth noting. It is John D. Caputo’s interpretation of Michel Foucault’s heuristic of identity: “following James Bernauer, I argue that there is a kind of negative or apophatic hermeneutics at work in Foucault, a hermeneutics of non-knowing ...” Obviously, this is a reminder of the exegetic principles that still endure in modern hermeneutics as well as of the mystical texts that stand in the background of contemporary apophatic discourses; for example, *The Cloud of Unknowing* or Gregory of Nyssa’s *Life of Moses*.<sup>10</sup> Intertwining the most successful translations of negativity, both as resistance or denial and as kenosis (dispossession, emptying of oneself) or apophasis (language gone through kenotic sacrifice):

[Foucault has] dropped the idea that there is some particular identity that is being repressed, he has not given up the idea that *something* is being repressed, something much looser, more unspecifiable and indefinite, something negative and uniden-

tifiable. It is no longer an *identity* we need to recover (a secret tragic identity) but a *difference*. ... In short, the movement has not been beyond hermeneutics and repression but beyond a hermeneutics of identity (a positive tragic hermeneutics) to a hermeneutics of difference (a negative hermeneutics of refusal)." (Caputo 34)

This "hermeneutics of refusal, of what we are not, ... I like to call "radical hermeneutics." (35)

This negative principle of identification through difference or "non-identification" (Adorno) is subject to deconstructive scrutiny in a dialectics of presence versus absence in Derrida's "How to Avoid Speaking." Between commas and among rhetorical security measures, he reckons: "Under the very loose heading of 'negative theology,' as you know, one often designates a certain form of language, with its *mise en scène*" (73) and then he adds, cautiously:

Suppose, by a provisional hypothesis, that negative theology consists of considering that every predicative language is inadequate to the essence ... of God; consequently, only a negative ('apophatic') attribution can claim to approach God ... By a more or less tenable analogy, one would thus recognize some traits, the family resemblance of negative theology, in every discourse that seems to return in a regular and insistent manner to this rhetoric of negative determination, endlessly multiplying the defenses and the apophatic warnings ... (74)

If negative hermeneutics does partake of an apophatic attitude with negative theology, which is true as long as hermeneutics itself refers initially to an augural practice and, as a modern discipline, is a secular translation of exegesis, then it is not about reading what is not there – as is "hermetic drift" (Eco), roving through infinite deferral (Derrida) or relevance theory that, through the study of "implicit inferences" (Sperber and Wilson), reduces negativity to latent information. At least for the sake of critical rigor, negative hermeneutics shall be considered a translation of negative *theology* (i.e., negative *exegesis of God*) to non-theological discourses. A hermeneutics of suspicion suspects that there are more intentions in the text; it firmly believes that a cornucopia of hidden intentions does exist despite the irreparable absence of the authorial figure. Although this may easily lead to an exclusively negative and subjectivizing practice of interpretation, for a hermeneutical attitude that radicalizes negativity as described by Wolfgang Iser:

[I]here is no frame of reference to offer criteria of right or wrong. This does not imply that the meaning must, consequently, be purely subjective; although it requires the subject to produce and experience it, the very existence of alterna-

tives makes it necessary for a meaning to be defensible and so intersubjectively accessible. (230)

Overvaluing the dimension of absence may hide the indicial value of the experience before it, because only what is experienced as missing (i.e., as once present) is truly absent. Heidegger gave this assumption a semiotic turn in his 1942–43's seminar on *Parmenides*, suggesting that signs both manifest and occult. This allowed him to explain the conflictive (co-inflective) nature of truth as *aletheia*: revelation that resists full understanding, night that cannot avoid morning light – an image familiar to many mystic authors that Heidegger unfortunately translates into the German political context. Translation, as we see, also sheds light over the text it substitutes; it hides the text it makes nonetheless visible. This kind of paradox is typical of negative theology. For Nicholas Davey, “it is not just translation that perpetuates” “an ineliminable space between the understanding of how a subject matter operates” in two different linguistic registers. “Understanding too is dependent upon the existence of a space it can never close. This reinforces the claim that the emergence of meaningful is dependent upon the absence of meaning” (202). For this reason, he adds, “within the realm of language . . ., nothing ever dies and nothing becomes fully present” (205). As Derrida also knows, cataphatic and apophatic modes of language are entangled (Derrida 29).

Negative hermeneutics resists the hegemony of an ideological discourse of absence through the recognition of an indexical mode of presence of the now absent producer of indices. This producer is often said to be a subject, in spite of *its* discursive implication and the objectuality of the communicative *intention* and practice; identified with the model of authorial figures, it has been annihilated as if there were a need to give Nietzsche's *deicide* an a posteriori justification. However, the author is itself an instance of negativity in a Hegelian sense, and that it is not to be identified with God is something that negative hermeneutics makes quite clear.

De Man's questioning of the frontier between literary theory and literature alerts one negatively to the fact that the critic has a specific critical authority and that the author also resists criticism and theorization. The history of art (namely literary art, as Ingarden would say) and its modes of representation may be read as an invitation to reconsider the hermeneutic practice, which is not immutable: “It would appear that modern art and literature are themselves beginning to react against the traditional form of interpretation: to uncover a hidden meaning” (Iser 11). Deconstruction has certainly contributed to develop creativity within interpretive practice

until it became more evident that the place where *resistance* and *imagination* are expected is literature rather than hermeneutics, even if the former is a laudable attitude and the latter is a vital capacity, and even though de Man's putting into question of a critical frontier risks reducing it to a rhetorical construct.

Following Iser's reasoning, both the recognition of the literary system's possibility of interfering with a world (positive) structure that may be challenged or to which other systems may adapt (71) and the recognition of a specificity of the reader's viewpoint when "grasping" the literary object (109) are implicit ways of considering literature as a form of negativity. Moreover, literary meanings can never constitute an absolute positivity: "the selections we make in reading produce an overflow of possibilities that remain virtual as opposed to actual" (126). Two moments are particularly emphatic about the importance of negativity for Iser's hermeneutic model:

Blanks and negations increase the density of fictional texts, for the omissions and cancellation indicate that practically all the formulations of the text refer to an unformulated background, and so the formulated text has a kind of unformulated double. This "double" we shall call negativity . . . . Unlike negation, negativity is not formulated by the text, but forms the unwritten base; it does not negate the formulation of the text, but – via blanks and negations – conditions them. (225–26)

Negativity . . . is the condition that enables the reader to construct the meaning of a text on a question-and-answer basis. . . . Meaning thus emerges as the reverse side of what the text has depicted. . . . Hence meaning coincides with the emergence of the reverse side of the represented world. (229)

Here, "the reverse" means the *negative* (in a photographic sense, so to say). In Davey's reading of Gadamer's "negative" hermeneutics (27), he develops Iser's idea that the need to communicate implies the existence of the unfamiliar (Davey 181–82; Iser 227, 229). Both authors deny that negative hermeneutics amounts to interpretive relativism (Davey 197–207; Iser 227–31)<sup>11</sup> not only because of the meaningfulness of an artwork but also, I would say, because for readers it is usually more important to find a meaning they can translate to their own experience than to search for a univocal, adequate meaning-in-itself. This is not a weakness of the literary system; rather, it points to the fact that knowledge about representations – among which literary ones are decisive – is fundamental to self-knowledge.

It is not necessary to read literature empirically through the reader's life experience, but the personal dimension of becoming will be probably easier to perceive if life is understood through the knowledge that comes



from literature. Equally relevant is the awareness of formal structures, rhetorical devices, and different modes of expression or communicative strategies within literary genres because, although it is not necessary to read literature critically to enjoy it, “literary literacy”<sup>12</sup> will improve a reader’s self-awareness through the literary work.<sup>13</sup>

The logical conclusion of this paper – that is, the *impossibility* of deeming literary studies a science in the sense of a positivity – is justifiable on the basis of theological, Hegelian, and neo-Marxist understandings of negativity. In turn, positive sciences should perhaps learn from the powerful vulnerability of negative hermeneutics. I believe that comparative studies could be their privileged meeting point.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See also Hayden White’s *The Content of the Form* 166.

<sup>2</sup> Responding to Knapp and Michaels’ homonymous article, Mitchell writes in *Against Theory*:

One also wonders why in the ontological part of their argument they collapse the radical and currently ubiquitous distinction between positive and negative hermeneutics, between those who believe in the possibility of grounding interpretation and those who don’t. For the latter move, at least, they give a reason [...] . . . “positive” theorists such as E. D. Hirsch and P. D. Juhl *add* intention (in the form of “authorial intention” or “speech acts”) to language in order to ground meaning whereas “negative” theorists such as Paul de Man *subtract* intention in order to preserve “the purity of language from the distortion of speech acts”. But despite their difference, both acts separate the supposedly inseparable; both make the “mistake” of the “theoretical impulse.” (74)

<sup>3</sup> In his influential article “Literary Criticism and Its Discontents”, Hartman observes: Modern hermeneutics, therefore, which seems so high-flying, is actually a negative hermeneutics. On its older function of saving the text, of tying it once again to the life of the mind, is superimposed the new one of doubting, by a parodistic or playful movement, master theories that claim to have overcome the past, the dead, the false. There is no Divine or Dialectical Science which can help us purify history absolutely, to pass in our lifetime a last judgment on it. (211–12)

Hartman’s own understanding of negative hermeneutics is better understood in *Criticism in the Wilderness: The Study of Literature Today* and *Saving the Text: Literature/Derrida/Philosophy*.

<sup>4</sup> See also Pauline Johnson’s “An Aesthetics of Negativity/An Aesthetics of Reception.”

<sup>5</sup> Wolfgang Iser states that “positions clearly denoted in the text may begin to negate one another (as frequently happens in novels, when protagonist meets antagonist)” (227).

<sup>6</sup> For instance, Jakob Böhme and Valentin Weigel, to name but two (see Gorceix). Other possible influences are studied by Jacques d’Hondt. Jean-Luc Nancy analyses negativity in Hegel’s thought.

<sup>7</sup> On this issue, see also Raya Dunayevskaya’s *The Power of Negativity: Selected Writings on the Dialectic in Hegel and Marx*. Further considerations or developments of the notion of negativity in language and politics may be found in authors such as Agamben, Blanchot, Nancy, Patočka, Vattimo, Weil, and Wolosky.



<sup>8</sup> There is an extraordinary wealth of bibliographic resources on the subject of negative theology and apophaticism, a term that usually refers to a discursive mode based on an ensemble of rhetoric procedures (e.g., oxymoron, hyperbole, definition through negation) used to express the ineffable (unsayable) or ineffability itself. Among the most relevant are: Budick, Carlson, de Certeau, Hart, Kenney, Lossky, Marion, McGinn, Nicholas, Papanikolaou, Turner, and von Balthasar.

<sup>9</sup> A critical reference to the deconstructionist notion of negative hermeneutics is to be found in Ian McKenzie's *Paradigms of Reading*: the literary work is considered as a resource rather than a source. *Paradigms* is also a response to Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson's Relevance Theory: "Just as much as Paul de Man, linguistic pragmatists such as Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson take as their starting point the fact that linguistic signs never coincide with intended or interpreted meanings" (196).

<sup>10</sup> Another reference to negative hermeneutics reveals a persisting identification with deconstruction: "Like the 'negative hermeneuticians' on the literary text and the philosophers of science on the scientific universe, [John] Macquarrie too argues the necessity of laboring without epistemological or ontological guarantees . . ." (Moore 244).

<sup>11</sup> Davey's *Unquiet Understanding* is also a response to Hamacher and Fenves.

<sup>12</sup> This notion is developed in my paper "Literatura e Literacias". The notion of self-knowledge as a knowledge of the veil that covers (veils) the text is present in the last chapter of *Publicidade e Intimidade*.

<sup>13</sup> Iser's distinction between meaning and significance is symptomatic of his ideal reader: "Meaning is the referential totality which is implied by the aspects contained in the text and which must be assembled in the course of reading. Significance is the reader's absorption of the meaning into his own existence. Only the two together can guarantee the effectiveness of an experience which entails the reader constituting himself by constituting a reality hitherto unfamiliar to himself" (151).

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## Negativna hermenevtika in pojem literarne vede

Ključne besede: literarna veda / literarna interpretacija / hermenevtika

Spreminjajoči se pomeni negativnosti v kontekstu interpretativnih praks izražajo različne ali celo divergentne hevristične strategije, ki se dvoumno imenujejo »negativna hermenevtika«. Izraz je leta 1965 uporabil Paul Ricœur, ko je Nietzschejevega Zaratustro obtožil upora proti krščanstvu, zaradi katerega je manj pomemben od pravega preroka. V zgodnjih sedemdesetih letih je Fredric Jameson na marksističen način uporabil razliko med pozitivno in negativno hermenevtiko, pri čemer je zadnjo sekulariziral in oplemenitil sum kot strategijo za razkritje ideologije, čeprav je zagovarjal njuno istočasno uporabo. Na Jamesona sta vplivala Hegel (subjekt *sive* negativnost) in Adorno (tvegana izbira besed in negativne dialektike). Ne moremo zagotovo vedeti, ali Heglov koncept negativnega določa želja po razumevanju subjekta kot negativnosti prek tega, kar bi Bloom imenoval namerna napačna razlaga negativne teologije. Treba pa je opozoriti, da se pri Heglu koncepti in stvari, na katere se ti koncepti nanašajo, bistveno razlikujejo in edina možnost njihove identifikacije je medsebojna negacija, kar pomeni, da so njihove identitete pravzaprav negativnosti. Negacija zato neizbežno spodkopava pozitivnost razuma. Neoplatonski prizvoki Heglovega razumevanja negativnosti lahko tako zakrijejo sporočilo apofatičnega mysticizma v njegovih besedilih. Semiotični asketizem negativne teologije se je občasno slavil kot manihejsko sprejetje zla ali »nepravilnosti« v jeziku, ki ga najdemo v Bloomovi »napačni razlagi«, Foucaultovi »hermenevtiki nevedenja« (po mnenju Johna Caputa), Derridajevi »différance« itd. Po Heideggerjevi študiji »resnice« kot konfliktnega pojma je Wolfgang Iser (receptijska teorija) trdil, da negativnost ni nekaj, kar moramo premagati, ampak je, kot je nedavno izjavil tudi Nicholas Davey, prej značilnost pomena, bistven za – in ki zahteva – samospoznanje: negativna hermenevtika neomarksističnih teoretikov se idejno na novo interpretira prek krščanske eksegeze.

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