
Vico or Spinoza: An Other Way of Looking at Theory, circa 1983

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ABSTRACT

This is an anachronistic attempt to revisit “Theory in the 1980s” by casting light from an Other angle, namely, two anti-Cartesian critical *tours de force*—Vichian *criticism* and Spinozist *critique*—heuristically corresponding to Edward W. Said’s “secular criticism” and Paul de Man’s “deconstructive critique,” respectively. Said’s article “Secular Criticism” and de Man’s Messenger Lectures, both appearing in 1983, are closely analyzed in light of topics, patent or latent, including “epistemology of error”; “truth-as-trope and the-True-as-occurrence”; “the *literal* and *figural* body”; “humanized and dehumanized *conatus*”; “Humanistic and dehumanized philology”; “secularism and worldliness”; “oppositional *criticism* and immanent *critique*”; and “Ethics-as-ethology.” The essay’s *end* is emphatically not to “map”—let alone “define”—the entire discursive formation tentatively called “Theory in the 1980s,” but, rather, to *essayistically* open up the field of speculation beyond the spatio-temporal confines of individual oppositions or conflicts that informed those particular discourses. In the end, a possibility of reading the conjunction “or” in the title, “Vico or Spinoza,” as *otherwise* than oppositional, will be suggested in the form of a post-scriptum supplement.

KEYWORDS Edward W. Said, Paul de Man, secular criticism, deconstruction, *conatus*, dehumanization

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In 1695, a young scholar of Rhetoric named Giambattista Vico returned to his native Naples “[w]ith this learning and erudition” after nine years of seclusion in rural Vatolla, only to find himself “a stranger in his own land” where he “found the physics of Descartes at the height of its renown among the established men of letters” (*Autobiography* 132). Dumbstruck by the “great and sudden revolution in literary affairs in Naples,” this aspiring young man in the job market would observe:

Now the savants of the day, however great and learned, since they had all first and for a long time occupied themselves with corpuscular physics, experiments and machines, must have found the *Meditations* so abstruse that it was difficult for them to withdraw their minds from the senses enough to meditate on them; so that the highest praise of a philosopher was: He understands the *Meditations* of Descartes. (138)

Imagine a young man, a latter-day philologue and perhaps a long-standing ABD who, having spent the entire 1970s somewhere in the middle of nowhere completely secluded from the academic world, returned to the U.S. academia in 1980, attending the MLA Convention straight ahead. He would, I fancy, listen to the Presidential Address with comfort and assurance, hearing about the “love” of languages and literature repeated, almost obsessively (Vendler). And yet, once the individual sessions started, he would probably be shocked not only by the sheer volume of the program but also by the legions of mysterious headings in it, such as “Deconstruction as Politics” or “Lesbian Feminist Poetry in Texas”—these are, by the way, two of the samples Walter Jackson Bate has picked up in “The Crisis in English Studies” (1982). If he managed to sneak into one of those mysterious sessions, he might overhear the praise of a panelist: She understands the *Dissemination* of Derrida . . .

Desperately he would escape—far from the madding crowd’s incomprehensible jargons (They were literally speaking Greek—Was that *pharmakon* or *pharmakeus*?), he would seek asylum at the Book Exhibit, finding with joy a new book titled *Rhetoric as Philosophy: The Humanist Tradition* by Ernesto Grassi. It reads:

At the end of the humanist period Vico—in whose theories the whole humanist tradition reached its highest philosophical consciousness—is in radical opposition to Descartes and tries to reestablish the connection between philosophy and rhetoric and, at the same time, to reinstate the humanistic branches of knowledge—which Descartes treated negatively and without comprehension—by rendering their philosophical significance. (37)

Glad to learn that the humanist tradition, despite the latter-day Cartesianism's encroachment that he had just observed, was still alive, he might pick up another new title published in the year 1980, *The Critical Difference* by Barbara Johnson, allured by its subtitle: *Essays in the Contemporary Rhetoric of Reading*. Then he would, I imagine, be flabbergasted by its "Opening Remarks":

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The power of ignorance, blindness, uncertainty, or misreading is often all the more redoubtable for not being perceived as such. Literature, it seems to me, is the discourse most preoccupied with the unknown, but not in the sense in which such a statement is usually understood. The "unknown" is not what lies beyond the limits of knowledge, some unreachable, sacred, ineffable point toward which we vainly yearn. It lies, rather, in the oversights and slip-ups that structure our lives in the same way that an *X* makes it possible to articulate an algebraic equation. What literature often seems to tell us is the consequences of the way in which what is not known is not seen as unknown. It is not, in the final analysis, what you don't know that can or cannot hurt you. It is what you don't *know* you don't know that spins out and entangles "that perpetual error we call life." (xii)

Our Humanist would surely lament that academia had turned into an *asylum ignorantiae*, where ignorance is taken for knowledge and blindness for insight. I wonder, though, if he might have smelled a Spinozist heresy in those words.

I should stop indulging in a fancy and start arguing. But before moving on to the year 1983, let me quote just one more passage from 1980, which illustrates the sentiment, if you will, that underlies this essay. In her contribution to the SCE (Society for Critical Exchange) Reports 8 (Fall 1980), with the clever title "Nothing Fails like Success," Barbara Johnson forcefully declares at the outset:

As soon as any radically innovative thought becomes an *ism*, its specific groundbreaking force diminishes, its historical notoriety increases, and its disciples tend to become more simplistic, more dogmatic, and ultimately more conservative, at which time its power becomes institutional rather than analytical. The fact that what is loosely called deconstructionism is now being widely institutionalized in the United States seems to me both intriguing and paradoxical, but also a bit unsettling, although not for the reasons advanced by most of its opponents. (*World* 11)

Cartesianism, deconstructionism, or any *ism* tends to lose its originary "power,"

indeed, once it is institutionalized. However, it seems often to be the case that institutionalization of those *isms* tends to beget *resistance* to themselves at the same time. In the case of Cartesianism, for example, Vico opened up a wholly new field “in radical opposition to Descartes” (Grassi 37), while, half a century before, Spinoza, “un commentateur incomparable” of Descartes’s philosophy (Gilson 68), had had his precursor’s “radically innovative thought” even more radically distilled, as it were, to such an extent that it was transformed into something totally new, rich and strange, effecting an “epistemological break” with the whole Idealist tradition.¹ With this Cartesian analogy (however anachronistic) in mind, I would now like to turn to several texts that came into being on or about February 1983, including Edward W. Said’s “Secular Criticism” and Paul de Man’s Messenger Lectures at Cornell University.

Vico, or Secular Criticism

The year 1983 saw the inauguration of *New Vico Studies*, “one of the two journals dedicated exclusively to Vico—the other being the *Bollettino del Centro di Studi Vichiani*, which was founded by Pietro Piovani in Naples, Italy, in 1971” (Tagliacozzo 162). By the strenuous efforts and leadership of Giorgio Tagliacozzo, the “Dean” of Vico studies (Verene 70), the “Vico resurrection” in North America seems to have been firmly consolidated in the form of an academic journal. To the inaugural issue, Hayden White contributed an article, “Vico and the Radical Wing of Structuralist/Poststructuralist Thought Today,” in which the author of *Metahistory* assesses whether there is “any possible relation . . . between Vico’s thought and that of the current avant garde in the human sciences: the structuralist/post-structuralist current” in the face of their “all-but-uniform disinterest in Vico’s work.” According to White, although “Vico, in his hostility to Cartesianism, would seem at least to share a common enemy with Levi-Strauss, Barthes, Lacan, Foucault, and Derrida, the regnant Holy Family of modernism in the human sciences,” there is “a fundamental difference” (63). Among the various differences White examines, the last and most significant one concerns the question of “humanity”: “insofar as the structuralists and poststructuralists desire to preside over the funeral of this

¹ The epithet “anti-Cartesian” is not so appropriate for Spinoza as for Vico, in that Spinoza, unlike Vico’s “oppositional” attitude, faithfully takes on Descartes’s ideas and terms at first but subjects them to such a strong re-reading as to pressure them, as it were, to the phase-transformation point. Genevieve Lloyd aptly describes the transformative moment in Spinoza’s reading of Descartes this way: “Spinoza jolts his readers by using familiar locutions that turn out to imply something quite unfamiliar” (21). In that sense, more appropriate is perhaps the epithet “trans-Cartesian,” in the sense of “transform,” “transmute,” or even “transubstantiate,” but not of “transcend.”

'humanity,' even if in the interests of promoting attitudes less arrogant than those which led to imperialism, racism, sexism, and the like, they share nothing of the spirit of Vico's enterprise" (67). White then concludes that Nietzschean anti-humanism in which those current radical thoughts are all deeply rooted "marks the unbridgeable divide that separates Vico's thought from theirs" (68).

Edward Said's *Beginnings* (1975) was, in a sense, a maverick attempt at probing, if not bridging, this "unbridgeable divide" between Vico and Theory. Framed by the Vichian epigraph and the forty-page "Conclusion: Vico in His Work and in This," the monograph is an unabashedly Vichian take on Theory, and Tagliacozzo's indispensable "Recent Vico Scholarship in English" lists it among "three books published in 1975 [which] opened new perspectives in Vico studies" (108)—the other two being the English translation of Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Truth and Method* and Leon Pompa's *Vico: A Study of the "New Science."* Although Tagliacozzo notes that to his knowledge "not one of [Said's reviewers] has referred to Vico" (111), there is one—and a very significant one—by Hayden White published in *diacritics* in its Fall 1976 issue. With regard to "the eccentric, though eminently illuminating, reading of the *New Science* which Said offers us in this [concluding] chapter," White comments:

Said's reading of Vico is "strong" in the Bloomian sense, though he would no doubt think of it as "fraternal" rather than "filial." Nonetheless, Said explicitly states that Vico had provided seven "signposts" which had helped him "from the beginning to discuss beginnings and to sketch a method" (p. 357). What seems to have been central to his understanding of Vico was the latter's insistence on the possibility of beginning a cultural enterprise without any clear notion of the sacred or any resource other than human feeling and will. ("Criticism" 11)

Since I should not tarry in the 70s but should hurry to the 80s, I must leave a detailed analysis of these seven "signposts" for another occasion. But it may be worth noting here that Tagliacozzo, who was well-informed with academic achievements in philosophy and history, apparently paid no heed to one of the most prominent Theory journals of the day, even as Hayden White was one of his closest allies (while White was ready to casually refer to Harold Bloom's latest theory of influence). Perhaps the real "divide" was between Theory and the traditional disciplines in the humanities back in the 70s.

By the mid-1980s, the Vichian "signposts" for Said seem to have been boiled down to two, namely, primacy of the body and Vico's "oppositional" quality. When

he was asked in an interview how Vico came to “get a grip on” him, Said answered right away to that effect. He first referred to the description in Vico’s *New Science* of “a feral and Gentile man . . . wandering all over the surface of the earth, and gradually disciplining themselves, partly out of fear and partly out of providence,” in which he found an “extraordinary vision of development and education,” that is, “the way in which a body forms itself into a mind and a body, and then into a society.” Secondly, Said pointed out, “That oppositional quality to [Vico’s] work—his being anti-Cartesian, anti-rationalistic and anti-Catholic—was incredibly powerful” (Salusinszky 135-36). I do not mean to suggest that all the other “signposts” have been jettisoned, but rather, I would argue, many Vichian topics have turned out to be so congenial and indeed integral to Said’s mature thought that they get submerged in his thinking only to merge into what are to be commonly known as Saidian concepts—for instance, Vico’s approbation of *ars topica* and *ingenium* has been elevated (via Erich Auerbach’s *Ansatzpunkt*²) to Saidian “contrapuntal reading”; the Origin-beginnings pair has flowed into the filiation-affiliation pair; “Vico and the Idea of Philology” (to borrow the title of Auerbach’s essay) has most certainly inspired the Saidian brand of humanism and “worldliness,” and so forth. In any case, what seems rather interesting as regards the above-mentioned interview is that the two aspects that immediately struck Said in the mid-80s as distinctly Vichian were Vico’s anti-Cartesian *epistemology* and *attitude*.

Let me now turn to our main text in this section, “Secular Criticism” (1983). There are, in fact, two versions: the introduction to *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (1983; hereafter *WTC*) and the article published in *Raritan* (Winter 1983). Although it is noted that the latter is an (advance?) reprint “[b]y permission from the forthcoming *The World, the Text, and the Critic*,” it is considerably shorter than the former—I cannot tell whether omission was made of the former or addition was made to the latter, and whether it was made by the author or by the editor. Whichever is the case, these two versions of “Secular Criticism” are significantly different *in tone*, if not in argument.

Apart from the omission of all the footnotes, the *Raritan* article lacks the whole opening section of *WTC* (1-5) and four pages towards the end (26-29). The *Raritan* article opens with a quotation from Auerbach’s *Mimesis*, “one of the most admired and influential books of literary criticism ever written,” followed by discussion of “Auerbach’s autumnal essay ‘Philologie der Weltliteratur’” and his early interest in Vico, so as to claim that “philological work deals with humanity at

² Maire and Edward Said published their translation of Auerbach’s “Philologie der Weltliteratur” as early as 1969, in which not a few Saidian topics can already be found in embryo, including *Ansatzpunkt* (a point of departure).

large and transcends national boundaries.” Here Said drives home his point by quoting a passage from Auerbach’s essay: “our philological home is the earth: it can no longer be the nation” (*Raritan* 1-2; *WTC* 5-7). This opening move of the *Raritan* article brings us back to the very beginning of Said’s career (the 1969 co-translation of “Philologie der Weltliteratur”) and forth to his posthumous publication of “Introduction to Erich Auerbach’s *Mimesis*” and “The Return to Philology.” Indeed, it is perhaps safe to say, the *Raritan* article successfully places Said in the “heroic” tradition of Vico-Auerbachian Philology-cum-Humanism.

On the other hand, the incipit of the *WTC* introduction sets an aggressive, if not antagonistic, tone against contemporary Theory. For instance:

From being a bold interventionary movement across lines of specialization, American literary theory of the late seventies had retreated into the labyrinth of “textuality,” dragging along with it the most recent apostles of European revolutionary textuality—Derrida and Foucault—whose trans-Atlantic canonization and domestication they themselves seemed sadly enough to be encouraging. . . . “Textuality” is the somewhat mystical and disinfected subject matter of literary theory. (*WTC* 3)

Religious overtones in this passage cannot be missed—Said’s innuendo gets even more trenchant when he, apparently referring to his contemporary American critics, snaps at “a priestly caste of acolytes and dogmatic metaphysicians” (5). Here and elsewhere, Said tends to stretch the meaning of “religious” so widely as to include virtually anything that does not meet the criteria of “worldliness,” so that Theory becomes, for him, “religious” *par excellence*. By opposing “secular criticism” against whatever he designates as “religious”—or, rather, by stigmatizing as “religious” whatever he criticizes—Said is wont to run the risk of falling into the binary framework of secularism (see Viswanathan, *Outside*, ch. 2; “Religion”). In fact, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* as a book appears to be literally framed by this secularist binary opposition, with its body sandwiched by those opening pages of “Introduction: Secular Criticism” and the three-page “Conclusion: Religious Criticism,” in which several contemporary critical works are rather hastily condemned for their religious-sounding titles. It is noteworthy that its German translation by Brigitte Flickinger seems to avoid the above-mentioned “risk” by translating the titles of these two chapters as “Weltzugewandte Kritik” (literally, “world-facing—i.e., worldly—criticism”) and “Die religiöse Wende der Kritik” (“the religious turn of criticism”) respectively so as not to essentialize “Kritik” by the secular-religious binarism. Indeed, the German translation illuminates the problem latent in Said’s

“secular criticism”: Said in his “oppositional” mode is prone to collapse the two apparently similar but fundamentally different terms, “secular” and “worldly,” so much so that the Vico-Auerbachian concept of “worldliness” becomes vulnerable to the *secularist* ideology.

The other part that the *WTC* introduction has added (or the *Raritan* article has omitted) also concerns the “oppositional” quality in Said’s critical position—“the fact that I have been accused by colleagues of intemperate and even unseemly polemicism” (*WTC* 28). It is most forceful and even pristine when he criticizes “criticism modified in advance by labels like ‘Marxism’ or ‘liberalism,’” which he sees as an oxymoron, insisting that “even in the very midst of a battle in which one is unmistakably on one side against another, there should be criticism, because there must be critical consciousness if there are to be issues, problems, values, even lives to be fought for” (28). True to his word, Said did not refrain from “speaking truth” even to the Palestinian authorities when necessary. Then he sums up his “critical position” this way: “Perhaps a simpler way of expressing all this is to say that I have been more influenced by Marxists than by Marxism or any other *ism*” (29)—influenced by individuals, but not by schools.

After this rather straightforward statement regarding his own “critical position” (especially in relation to “Marxism” in North America), the *WTC* introduction moves on to a general conclusion in the penultimate paragraph, which is also shared by the *Raritan* article. Let me quote the passage at some length, as it is significant not only in itself but also for our argument concerning Said’s take on Vico’s “oppositional” quality:

Were I to use one word [besides *secular*] consistently along with *criticism* (not as a modification but as an emphatic) it would be *oppositional*. If criticism is reducible neither to a doctrine nor to a political position on a particular question, and if it is to be in the world and self-aware simultaneously, then its identity is its difference from other cultural activities and from systems of thought or method. In its suspicion of totalizing concepts, in its discontent with reified objects, in its impatience with guilds, special interests, imperialized fiefdoms, and orthodox habits of mind, criticism is most itself and, if the paradox can be tolerated, most unlike itself at the moment it starts turning into organized dogma. (*WTC* 29; *Raritan* 25, with two words “besides *secular*” added)

The final warning against “turning into organized dogma” seems to echo Barbara Johnson’s precaution against *deconstructionism* at the outset of “Nothing Fails like Success,” quoted above. There is, however, a difference in nature between Saidian

“oppositional” *criticism* and what Barbara Johnson explicates as *critique* in her “Translator’s Introduction” (1981) to Derrida’s *Dissemination*:

It can thus be seen that deconstruction is a form of what has long been called a *critique*. A critique of any theoretical system is not an examination of its flaws or imperfections. It is not a set of criticisms designed to make the system better. It is an analysis that focuses on the grounds of that system’s possibility. (xv)

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Whereas Saidian *criticism*’s “identity” is defined by (hence, depends upon) “its difference from other cultural activities and from systems of thought or method” (i.e., difference *between*), Johnsonian-Derridian *critique* does not pre-posit or project any identity, either of itself or of its object, but instead merely *operates* “by the careful teasing out of warring forces of signification *within the text itself*” (i.e., difference *within*).³ I do not mean to evaluate these two “critical” positions, but I believe that a comparison with the Johnsonian-Derridian immanent *critique* will illustrate the latent risk of Saidian oppositional *criticism*: its “strong” self-positioning against any *isms*, based on the identity-difference binarism without being tested by an immanent *critique* of that binary system itself, may yield to another set of *isms*, such as *secularism*—or even Saidianism.⁴

With this observation in mind, we may again look at Said’s comment as to Vico’s “grip” on him: “That oppositional quality to his work—his being anti-Cartesian, anti-rationalistic and anti-Catholic—was incredibly powerful” (Salusinszky

³ The distinction between “critique” and “criticism” plays a central role in the 2013 exchanges among Judith Butler, Talal Asad, and Saba Mahmood over the post-secular question: Is critique secular? Judith Butler, in much the same way as Barbara Johnson, glosses the distinction in the following way: “Criticism usually takes an object, and critique is concerned to identify the conditions of possibility under which a domain of objects appears” (102-03).

⁴ It is, of course, unfair to presume that the author of *Beginnings*, one of the earliest and most innovative works that introduced “French Theory” to North America, should ever be ignorant of the “test” to be posed by deconstructive *critique*; rather, it would be more appropriate to understand that Said has deliberately *unlearned* such a “theoretical” posture. R. Radhakrishnan, for one, maintains that “Said made a very clear choice” so that “[h]e would thenceforth not call himself a theorist” but “would rather call himself a ‘critic’ in the old-fashioned sense of the term: one who is informed and inspired by ‘critical consciousness’” (117). Radhakrishnan apparently locates this critical moment in Said’s public lecture, “Secular, Oppositional Humanism,” which he himself attended in the summer of 1982 and which is presumably a prototype of the essay in question, “Secular Criticism.” That does not mean, however, that the “latent risk of Saidian ‘oppositional’ criticism” is negligible, but instead, I would claim, the risk can be all the more real when Saidians, if not Said himself, become oblivious to the *original* process of unlearning and uncritically begin with the strong, “oppositional” position by appealing to the *original* authority of Edward Said, so that deconstructive *critique* may no longer be regarded as a necessary “test” but simply as something negligible or even detestable. I thank one of the anonymous reviewers of my essay for calling my attention to Walter Benjamin’s austere imperative to “wrestle with it in solitude and, in exceptional cases, to take on themselves the responsibility of ignoring it”—indeed, the real risk lies where “exceptional cases” get normalized and domesticated.

136). Vico's anti-Cartesian, anti-rationalistic attitude is *positive*, in that it re-collects the "worldly" elements (such as body and society, that is, more profoundly, the *common* as opposed to identity politics⁵) that the Cartesian methodological doubt has denied, while it valorizes *ars topica* as a way of finding ("inventing") this world/this text abundant in meaning over *ars critica* as a way of *rational* (deductive) judgment by virtue of "rank[ing] the unadulterated essence of 'pure,' primary truth before, outside, above any material representation [*ante, extra, supra omnes corporum imagines*]" (Vico, *Study Method* 13; translation altered). It should quickly be added that Vico does *not* deny *ars critica*, but only insists that *ars topica* should precede *ars critica*. In other words, the first two *anti*'s signify a positive "manner" in opposition to an impoverishing "method":

The use of the word *method* to describe Vico's procedure has to everyone (Vico himself not excluded) seemed fairly inaccurate. It is not just that as he grew older Vico opposed his "topical" manner to the Cartesian-Port-Royal geometric method. That opposition was methodical and polemical, by which the "invention" of arguments around a subject exposed the thinness of straight deduction; Vico's circular manner . . . pitted the wealth of human diversity against the poverty of philosophy mathematically considered. . . . The power of Vico's rhetoric always takes one away from method, rationalistically considered, to knowledge as pathos, invention, imagination—with their pitfalls unobscured. (Said, *Beginnings* 368)

The third *anti* (i.e., Said's labeling Vico as "anti-Catholic") is, however, not just factually untenable; it does not seem to contain any of the positive elements described above. Vico's extraordinarily fruitful depiction of the "gentile" world by finding (i.e., "inventing") its narrative beginning in "the huge bodies of the giants" (*New Science* 179), which is no doubt one of the greatest sources of inspiration for Said's secular criticism, may perhaps involve a taint of heterodoxy from the Catholic viewpoint, and yet this "gentile" world certainly does not *oppose* but simply *predates* the Catholic one. It would be more fruitful, then, to regard the Vichian gentile-sacred binarism not as *oppositional* but as *interpenetrative*—that is to say,

⁵ See Roberto Esposito's insightful reading of Vico's *New Science*: "Nothing conveys the world of the forest better than 'confusion.' It confuses—fuses together—the elements that compose it, thus depriving them of their proper differential status. This is because, in its excess beyond representation, it represents the very opposite of difference—namely the indifference that erases the distinction between the one and the other, positive and negative, human and animal. . . . Not only is the proper—like individuality, difference, and discontinuity—what they are not, it is also their antonym, since what characterizes them is precisely its contrary, which is to say, the improper. Or, even more profoundly, the common" (77-78).

the Catholic world is not a once-and-for-all departure from the “gentile” world but is in fact full of residual “gentile” (or heterodox) elements, which in turn constitute various points of departure (*Ansatzpunkte*) for “topical” finding (*inventio*) of emergent ideas. By appealing to the negative-oppositional (i.e., binary) self-positioning in certain cases such as those concerning religion (including, of course, Theory-as-religion), I would argue, Said is prone (“sadly enough,” indeed) to substitute the secularist polemics for the Vico-Auerbachian idea of Philology-cum-Humanism (worldliness). In this sense, it may be telling that the *WTC* introduction has omitted⁶ two words “besides *secular*” in the above-quoted opening sentence of the penultimate paragraph (“Were I to use one word ~~besides *secular*~~ consistently along with *criticism* . . . it would be *oppositional*”), in that the text (if not the author) seems to imply that the relation between “secular” and “oppositional” is not one of contiguity but of identity.

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Instead of such a secularist take on the “gentile” world portrayed in Vico’s *New Science*, one may legitimately—and, in my opinion, more fruitfully—focus on the bodily aspect of its narrative, which brings us to the other “grip” that Said talked about in the interview, namely, primacy of the body. The following, slightly odd phrasing in one of the more explicit statements in “Secular Criticism” regarding “the critical consciousness [which] is a part of its actual social world and of *the literal body that the consciousness inhabits*, not by any means an escape from either one or the other” (*WTC* 16; *Raritan* 22-23; emphasis added) may only be understood against the backdrop of Said’s focus on Vico’s inversion of the Cartesian mind-body dichotomy. This theme has, in fact, been fully elaborated by Said in “Vico on the Discipline of Bodies and Texts,” a paper presented at a symposium at Johns Hopkins University in 1976, with Northrop Frye, Eugenio Donato, and Stanley Fish being the other speakers, where Said’s “worldly” approach even to the core issue of epistemology is already apparent:

Thus Vico’s writing itself is enlivened when rarefied realms—such as truth or meaning—are shown to have those physical bases which conventional scholarship all but eliminates. His etymological habits are a form of “retro-signification”

⁶ Most likely, what has happened is not “omission” in *WTC* but “addition” in *Raritan*, which is then possibly made by the editor rather than by the author. However, (*inter-*)textually speaking, this omission, or “repression,” of the two words in one text—this is the only omission I have found in *WTC*—seems to me far more significant than the actual “author” or “fact,” though such an attitude of privileging “textuality” over “worldly” matters should no doubt irritate Said.

that drives meanings back to the bodies from whence originally they came. This is anti-Cartesian atavism with a vengeance. (*Reflections* 85)

Said goes on to claim, presumably in response to the theme of the symposium (“Responsibilities of the Critic”), that “[f]or the literary critical theorist of today Vico’s type of atavism is usefully suggestive”:

We are too comfortable I think with the idea of a literary text as inhabiting a dimensionless, uncircumstanced, and even sexless element, purged of every worldly evidence except the sovereignty of its author, vulnerable to the whimsy of ingenious interpretation and system building. Vico’s way with texts is principally to push them back into the human struggles from which they emerge. (86)

It is probably unnecessary to re-confirm that these passages concerning “anti-Cartesian atavism” represent the “worldly,” not the *secularist*, side of “Secular Criticism” *avant la lettre*. And it must be fair to say that the above-quoted, slightly odd, perhaps unnecessary addition, “the literal body that the consciousness inhabits,” directly comes from Said’s reading of Vico’s “insight that there is always something *outside* mere logical sense to be engaged and dealt with when human reality is discussed[, which] is the body, whose untidy, immediate, sprawling largeness becoming intelligent and fit for social history is Vico’s *real* subject” (85; emphases added). The “real” aim of *The New Science*—a product of “Vico’s lonely, eccentric originality” (85)—is, in short, to “invent” (or “topically” find) a narrative of the “discipline” of bodies that originally stayed “outside” the realm of human consciousness, that is, to narrate how the human consciousness has come to “inhabit” the unruly primitive body of the giants.

Still, the adjective “literal” that Said has used in the above phrase seems rather odd—as if there were also the “figural” body. At this juncture, I suppose, a reader may well be reminded of Paul de Man’s discussion of another “giant”—this time, not the *literal* but the *figural* “giant,” so to speak, that Rousseau conjures up in his own speculation about the origin of language—in *Allegories of Reading* (1979), whether or not this famous argument might have been in Said’s mind. De Man writes:

The fact that Rousseau chose fear as an example to demonstrate the priority of metaphor over denomination complicates and enriches the pattern to a considerable degree, for metaphor is precisely the figure that depends on a certain degree of correspondence between “inside” and “outside” properties. The

word “giant,” invented by the frightened primitive to designate his fellow-man, is indeed a metaphor in that it is based on a correspondence between inner feelings of fear and outward properties of size. It may be objectively false (the other man is not in fact any taller) but it is subjectively candid (he seems taller to the frightened subject). The statement may be in error, but it is not a lie. (*Allegories* 150-51)

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Indeed, the question of “literal” and “figural” sits in the middle of this (imaginary) conversation between Vico-Said and Rousseau-de Man:

The metaphor “giant,” used to connote man, has indeed a proper meaning (fear), but this meaning is not really proper: it refers to a condition of permanent suspense between a literal world in which appearance and nature coincide and a figural world in which this correspondence is no longer *a priori* posited. Metaphor is error because it believes or feigns to believe in its own referential meaning. (151)

Said’s “anti-Cartesian atavism,” or primacy of the body, can be translated in de Manian terminology into primacy of the literal, which is, needless to say, an easy target of deconstructive *critique*. It is, however, also safe to say that Said, while no doubt anticipating that sort of critique, deliberately bases his argument on the literal-figural binary opposition (and its “anti-Cartesian” inversion), so as to optimize his “oppositional” quality against those who are “vulnerable to the whimsy of ingenious interpretation and system building” and to make his own readings “enlivened when rarefied realms—such as truth or meaning—are shown to have those physical bases which conventional scholarship all but eliminates.”

Although this is no place to decide which is better, de Manian *critique* or Saidian *criticism*, it seems of great significance that one fundamental difference emerges in this particular set of quotations above, namely, the difference as regards the epistemology of “error,” if not of “truth.” Concerning de Man and the question of error, an obvious point of reference may be Stanley Corngold’s *Critical Inquiry* article, “Error in Paul de Man” (1982), which is also anthologized in *The Yale Critics: Deconstruction in America* (1983). Corngold’s thesis that “error” and “mistake” must be rigorously distinguished in de Man’s oeuvre does not really strike me as persuasive or productive, if not utterly misguided—de Man himself apparently disowns such an argument in a rather condescending manner. In my opinion, its real significance lies in the fact that it has drawn a response from de Man himself. It seems significant not so much because it was one of the very few

cases (or, perhaps, even the only case) where de Man cared to respond to a criticism of that sort, as because he explicates the deconstructive epistemology of error/mistake in a general or even *teacherly*⁷ manner, rather than in his characteristic rigor:

Whenever a binary pair is being analyzed or “deconstructed,” the implication is never that the opposition is without validity in a given empirical situation (no one in his right mind could maintain that it is forever impossible to tell night from day or hot from cold) but only that the *figure* of opposition involved in all analytical judgments is not reliable, precisely because it allows, in the realm of language to which, as figure, it belongs, for substitutions that cannot occur in the same manner in the world of experience. When one moves from empirical oppositions such as night and day to categorical oppositions such as truth and falsehood, the epistemological stakes increase considerably because, in the realm of concepts, the principle of exclusion applies decisively. (de Man, “A Letter” 510)

While this is a rebuttal to a common criticism that deconstruction annihilates “real opposition,”⁸ it is, more importantly, an explication of how (aesthetic) ideology works: whatever opposition (or any “relationship” for that matter) we believe we are confronted with is, in fact, always already “substituted” by the *figure* of opposition (or, in Althusserian terms, “representation of the imaginary relationship”), so that we cannot stand outside-of-*figure* (“ideology has no outside”) but must always be in error (“unless one is really a Spinozist or a Marxist, which, in this matter, is to be exactly the same thing”⁹). Hence, “The critical function of deconstruction is,” de Man continues his teaching, “not to blur distinctions but to identify the power of linguistic figuration as it transforms differences into oppositions, analogies, contiguities, reversals, crossings, and any other of the relationships that articulate the textual field of tropes and of discourse” (510-11).

It is at this point that de Man makes a somewhat obscure but none the less significant comment with regard to “error” and “mistake” (whose usage he confesses he does not control “as consistently as [he] should have”):

⁷ Interestingly enough, Corngold’s malcontent accusations start with an appeal to “Paul de Man as a teacher” (489).

⁸ In comparison, Said’s criticism against Theory may be summarized as follows: “There is oppositional debate without real opposition” (WTC 160).

⁹ See Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses”: “As is well known, the accusation of being in ideology only applies to others, never to oneself (unless one is really a Spinozist or a Marxist, which, in this matter, is to be exactly the same thing). Which amounts to saying that ideology *has no outside* (for itself), but at the same time *that it is nothing but outside* (for science and reality)” (131).

[A]ny decision one makes with regard to the absolute truth or falsehood value of a text always turns out to be a mistake. And it will remain one unless the perpetrator of the mistake becomes critically aware of the abusive schematization that caused his mistake and thus transforms the mistaking of error (for mistake) into the error of mistaking. (511)

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Together with the above-quoted sentence concerning metaphor and error (“Metaphor is error because it believes or feigns to believe in its own referential meaning”), the criterion of error/mistake proposed here is, I would argue, exemplary of Spinozist epistemology, as Part II Proposition 17 Scholium of the *Ethics* reads: “I should like you to note that the imaginations of the mind, looked at in themselves, contain no error; i.e., the mind does not err from the fact that it imagines, but *only insofar as it is considered to lack the idea which excludes the existence of those things to be present to it*” (257; IIp17s; emphasis added)—in other words, error does not lie in one’s *figural* (mis)understanding (*imaginatio*, or representation) of the *literal* truth per se, but in one’s *unawareness* of, or “stupidity” of not knowing, the fact that the *figural* and the *literal* are (always already) mixed, confused¹⁰ in the very act of understanding. And it should be noted also that there is no outside-of-error in this scheme, just as de Man notes at the end of the same paragraph: “it can be said that no language would be possible without this error” (152), a statement echoing another exemplary Spinozist dictum, uttered by Louis Althusser: “Ideology is eternal.”¹¹

The word “stupidity” above is actually used by de Man in “Anthropomorphism and Trope in Lyric” in a Nietzschean (hence, Spinozist) context: “Whatever truth may be fighting, it is not error but stupidity, the belief that one is right when one

¹⁰ Such “confusion” is precisely constitutive of de Man’s definition of “ideology” in “Resistance to Theory” (1982). The following passage is one of the most oft-quoted, but has rarely been recognized as a most exemplary explication of Spinozist (hence, Marxist) epistemology: “What we call ideology is precisely the confusion of linguistic with natural reality, of reference with phenomenism. It follows that, more than any other mode of inquiry, including economics, the linguistics of literariness is a powerful and indispensable tool in the unmasking of ideological aberrations, as well as a determining factor in accounting for their occurrence. Those who reproach literary theory for being oblivious to social and historical (that is to say ideological) reality are merely stating their fear at having their own ideological mystifications exposed by the tool they are trying to discredit. They are, in short, very poor readers of Marx’s *German Ideology*” (*Resistance* 11).

¹¹ In his insightful comparison of de Man’s reading of Rousseau with Althusser’s, Michael Sprinker argues that, despite “de Man’s overly hasty references to Althusser,” they share “a common understanding of the material effects, indeed the material existence of ideology,” so much so that the “de Manian concept of the text is a theory of the permanence of ideology [*à la* Althusser]” (*Imaginary* 260, 264). I agree with this observation of Sprinker’s, and, to a great extent, I also agree with Sprinker’s further argument that de Man stops at the theorization of text/ideology, short of arriving at an Althusserian concept of “science,” i.e., “epistemological break.” In the following argument of this essay, however, I would like to glance at the possibility of reading de Man’s final take on Baudelaire’s two sonnets as a potential “epistemological break” of the same sort.

is in fact in the wrong” (*Rhetoric* 242). The essay (or lecture) in question is the first of the Messenger Lectures de Man gave at Cornell University in February-March 1983 and does, quite significantly in my opinion, devote the first four pages (or fourteen minutes) to the question of truth and trope (truth *as* trope), before moving on to the most forceful of de Manian *tours de force*, namely, his reading of the two Baudelaire sonnets, “Correspondances” and “Obsession.”¹² It is, according to Barbara Johnson, “one of the most difficult, even outrageous, of his essays” (*Persons* 189). For lack of space and time, I dare not venture a full-fledged reading of de Man’s reading here, and all I can offer instead is a sketchy argument in accordance with the theme of my essay, which I hope will pave the way for future explication on another occasion.

Just as the (recorded) lecture starts in a comfortable atmosphere with de Man expressing his joy in “com[ing] back home,” so the main part (i.e., the essay posthumously collected in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*) starts comfortably, at least to the implied reader, with a pet quotation from Nietzsche, in which truth is defined as “[e]in bewegliches Heer von Metaphern, Metonymien, Anthropomorphismen” in German,¹³ leading smoothly to a now familiar statement: “there is nothing inherently disruptive in the assertion that truth is a trope” (241). But then, in a “double-take” moment (to borrow Cynthia Chase’s apt phrase), “an abrupt slowing down of the reading” (Chase 18) occurs:

But “anthropomorphism” is not just a trope but an identification on the level of substance. It takes one entity for another and thus implies the constitution of specific entities prior to their confusion, the *taking* of something for something else that can then be assumed to be *given*. Anthropomorphism freezes the infinite chain of tropological transformations and propositions into one single assertion or essence which, as such, excludes all others. (de Man, *Rhetoric* 241)

It seems that we may have to re-phrase the immediately preceding sentence as “truth is a trope (metaphor and metonymy) *or* a trope-*plus* (anthropomorphism)” —the additional phrase ought to follow a disjunctive “or,” because “tropes such as metaphor (or metonymy) and anthropomorphisms are mutually exclusive” (241). The “plus” here is, to follow de Man’s argument faithfully, “an identification on the level of substance” (hence, ontological?), which is, without delay (or proper

¹² The recordings of these Messenger lectures are available online:

<https://backdoorbroadcasting.net/2013/10/paul-de-man-the-messenger-lectures-1983/>

¹³ In the lecture, de Man gives its English translation verbatim after reading the German sentence, although he does not bother to do the same for “Correspondances,” which, he says, “I’m sure you all know by heart.”

explanation) on his part, identified as “a proper name” like (*comme*) “Narcissus or Daphne or whatever” (a proper *whatever?*). This is an odd move, to say the least, as though the “given” (or “assumed-to-be-given,” to be exact) that is supposed to “freeze” the infinite tropological chain were far from being frozen, solid, in that the designated exemplars are a couple of protean characters (i.e., transformative or *figural* bodies) in Greek mythology. (Note that the adjective “protean” is itself a figural transformation that a proper name “Proteus” has suffered . . . plus, “or whatever”?)

We have, in fact, already encountered a good candidate for such proper “whatever”: the “giant.”

By calling him a “giant,” one freezes hypothesis, or fiction, into fact and makes fear, itself a figural state of suspended meaning, into a definite, proper meaning devoid of alternatives. (de Man, *Allegories* 151)

It should not be so far-fetched to find an apparent homology between this passage and the previously quoted: anthropomorphism “freezes” the tropological chain “into” one single, exclusive essence, while the act of calling another (person or whatever) by a certain name (such as “the giant”) “freezes” fiction “into” fact, or figure “into” a definite, proper, and exclusive meaning. However, it should obviously be too far-fetched if one concluded that, *ergo*, “the giant” in the second passage is “a proper name.” Instead, one should more reasonably conclude from these homologous statements that anthropomorphism is (structured like) an act of calling (or “appellation”—even including, possibly, “Hey, you!” or “Freeze!”). That is to say, it is not so much a substantial “proper name” as performative “naming,” so much so that its end may not be confined within the human. After all, it is “the *taking* of something for something else that can then be assumed to be *given*,” not “someone.” It then follows that we do not have to take this particular usage of “anthropomorphism” here *literally* as pertaining to the human, although de Man has once defined it, in contrast to *prosopopeia*, as “a conceit by which human consciousness is projected or transferred into the natural world” (*Rhetoric* 89). Instead, we may regard it as merely representing the mechanism of “freez[ing] the infinite chain of tropological transformations and propositions,” namely, the whole economy of truth-as-trope, or *ideology*. In other words, “anthropomorphism” here, despite its etymology, ought to be dehumanized.

As we slowly read on, then, the opening sentence of the immediately following passage, “Truth is now defined by two incompatible assertions: either truth is a set of propositions or truth is a proper name” (de Man, *Rhetoric* 241), may be translated,

oddly circular or even paradoxical as it may sound, as follows: Truth is a trope *or* that which freezes the economy of “truth is a trope.” Even as we try to understand this proposition without letting ourselves fall into a pitfall of Russell’s paradox, when we come to another seemingly contradictory proposition, “anthropomorphism is structured like a trope,” we cannot but feel that we are trapped in a circular limbo. But then—in another double-take—we are abruptly told, in an almost imperative mode, that we are actually on the one-way street:

it is easy enough to cross the barrier that leads from trope to name but impossible, once this barrier has been crossed, to return from it to the starting-point in “truth.” Truth is a trope; a trope generates a norm or value; this value (or ideology) is no longer true. It is true that tropes are the producers of ideologies that are no longer true. (242)

As we have already confirmed, in de Manian epistemology of error as well as Althusserian critique of ideology, “truth is a trope” can be translated as “there is no outside-of-error,” so it is understandable that “truth” is first put in parentheses, thus qualified. And yet, an apparently careless metaphor of “barrier”-crossing and the eerie repetition of “no longer true” linger uneasily, as though there were certain “outside” beyond the “barrier” and/or a lost, truly true “truth.”

This uneasiness directs us to the penultimate lecture of the series, “Kant and Schiller,” in which a significant distinction of *das Wahre* (that which is true) from *Wahrheit* (truth) is examined, precisely in the context of barrier-crossing, or “the passage from trope, which is a cognitive model, to the performative” and its “irreversibility” (de Man, *Aesthetic* 132). Here, I would suggest, de Man makes a significant leap from the epistemologico-deconstructive *critique* of truth-as-trope, into an *other* dimension, that is, the ontological dimension of the True. In our context, I believe, it is legitimate to read Althusserian “epistemological break” into these passages: “this passage occurs always, and can only occur, by ways of an epistemological critique of trope”; “The performative is not a negation of the tropological. Between the tropological and the performative there is a separation which allows for no mediation whatsoever” (133). Such a leap has been *performed* in the opening lecture by his ingenious reading, or *staging*, of the “passage” from “Correspondances” to “Obsession” (or, according to de Man’s anthropomorphic description, the latter’s “reading” of the former), in which the aporetic signifier “comme” *acts* as a guarantor of the transcendence of substitutive, analogical tropes by its linking power while at the same time becoming its very disruptor by causing “the stutter, the *piétinement* of aimless enumeration,” i.e., “eventuality” (*Rhetoric*

254), to occur in the same text. There is apparently no human actor involved, so “the sheer blind violence” (262) is as appropriate an expression as it is ominous.

Also, what seems particularly interesting in “Kant and Schiller” is the fact that de Man is “improvis[ing]” this lecture without a written-out script, so his argumentation tends to be filled with repetitions and corrections, lapses and redundancies, and even “the stutter,” as if the text were trying to *performatively* show how the-True-as-occurrence disrupts the chains of truth-as-trope:

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When I speak of irreversibility, and insists on irreversibility, this is because in all those texts and those juxtapositions of texts, we have been aware of something which one could call a progression—though it shouldn’t be—a movement, from cognition, from acts of knowledge, from states of cognition, to something which is no longer a cognition but which is to some extent an *occurrence*, which has the materiality of something that actually happens, that actually occurs. . . . [N]ot truth, not *Wahrheit*, but *das Wahre*, that which is true, will occur, will take place, will eventually take place, will eventually occur. And the characteristic of truth is the fact that it occurs, not the truth, but that which is true. The occurrence is true because it occurs; by the fact that it occurs it has truth, truth value, it is true. (*Aesthetic* 132)

I have quoted this passage at length so as to show the very texture, or the *occurrence*, of the text that struggles for the un-articulable True to *occur* amidst the all-pervasive truth-as-trope. The task is no longer epistemologico-critical, but ontologico-performative.

That the True is defined as that which “will occur, will take place, will eventually take place, will eventually occur” means that the True is the *Virtual*—that which *has to* be actualized and is, once actualized, no longer True—just as Spinoza’s God is *natura naturans*, that which *has to* actualize/differentiate Itself into *natura naturata*. The Spinozist epistemology has leaped into a Spinozist ontology. As I have suggested elsewhere (Mihara), such a “leap into ontology” (Deleuze, *Bergsonism* 57), or a probe into “The Virtual Whole,” may find its exemplars in, for instance, Henri Bergson’s *mémoire pure*, Julia Kristeva’s *géné-texte*, and Giorgio Agamben’s *una zona di indifferenza*. The last is worth particular notice here, in that Agamben’s probe is based on what he calls *experimentum linguae*—first used as the title of the 1989 preface to the French translation of *Infancy and History* (1978)—which shows significant commonality and contemporaneity with that of de Man. To my knowledge, Leland de la Durantaye is one of the few who call attention to that elective affinity. I genuinely appreciate his attention to their shared sense (*via*

Benjamin) of the experiment/experience of language as a foundation for aesthetics and ethics. However, I disagree with his final assessment as to their divergence. According to de la Durantaye, the “experience of the materiality of language is associated in de Man’s late work with stuttering, loss, falling, failure, automatism, the ‘inhuman,’ and death,” which leads to “engendering the disappearance of the human and the ethical in de Man’s grammatical machinations of language” (133). My contention is that, precisely because de Man’s experiment/experience of language is utterly *dehumanized*, it is indeed *ethical*.

I say, not “inhuman” but “dehumanized”—or “de-Manized,” if you pardon me the joke of this gloomy grimace. Perhaps others may say that “inhuman” is more appropriate than “dehumanized,” as “inhuman” is the keyword that has mostly occupied the Q&A session following “Conclusions: Walter Benjamin’s ‘The Task of the Translator,’” i.e., the very finale of the 1983 Messenger Lectures. Successive questioning as regards “inhuman” is passed on by Neil Hertz, Richard Klein, and finally M. H. Abrams—at this point, de Man murmurs in an almost self-mocking tone: “‘Inhuman’ becomes a curious and all-invading concept here” (*Resistance* 99)—among whom Abrams, who insists on “present[ing] the humanistic perspective, as an alternative” (100), is most persistent. The long exchange between these former colleagues is amicable, but not quite felicitous, as there is obviously a difference in nature in their usage of the very term “inhuman.” For the Master Humanist Abrams, “language is the most human of all things we find in the world, in that language is entirely the product of human beings” (99), pure and simple, whose premise is that “all things” can be defined in terms of the human/inhuman binarism. De Man, on the other hand, claims that “there is, in a very radical sense, no such thing as the human” (96), so as to deconstruct the very binary opposition on which Abrams premises his criticism. In other words, de Man tries to de-humanize the whole human/inhuman discourse of the Q&A session in particular as well as that of Theory in general. In fact, de Man in these lectures never uses “inhuman” as a positive term for his argument, but only negatively—that is to say, it is a *critique* of “the human” that really matters, in that it operates, in Schiller’s misrepresentation of Kant for instance, as “a certain principle of closure which is no longer accessible to rational critical analysis” (*Aesthetic* 151); it is, in other words, “aesthetic ideology” *par excellence*.

During this infelicitous, heated debate over the “inhuman,” there is a rather dramatic moment—or so it strikes me—in which de Man is so eager to ward off any claim of human authority over language that he, willingly or unwillingly, resorts to a kind of anthropomorphism of “language”:

That there is a nonhuman aspect of language is a perennial awareness from which we cannot escape, because *language does things which are so radically out of our control* that they cannot be assimilated to the human at all, against which one fights constantly. . . . Things happen in the world which cannot be accounted for in terms of the human conception of language. (*Resistance* 101; emphasis added)

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Later that same day, in an interview by Stefano Rosso,¹⁴ de Man seems to go even farther, even as he offers rather confusing excuses:

I have a tendency to put upon texts an inherent authority, which is stronger, I think, than Derrida is willing to put on them. I assume, as a working hypothesis (as a working hypothesis, because I know better than that), that the text *knows* in an absolute way what it's doing. I know this is not the case, but it is a necessary working hypothesis that Rousseau knows at any time what he is doing and as such there is no need to deconstruct Rousseau. (*Resistance* 119)

This is not even *anthropo*-morphism but *theo*-morphism, as it were, since to know “in an absolute way” is not human but divine. In any case, the confusion here—after all, who *knows* best, “the text,” “I,” or “Rousseau”?—is symptomatic, just like “the stutter” of the-True-as-*occurrence* above, of the “leap into ontology” that is taken while still being tethered to epistemological critique. At this point, we may glance at what I would call ecosophical (emphatically not “ecocritical”) literary theory, which finds its foundation in Spinoza’s most anti-Cartesian doctrines: “The order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things” (247; II p7); “[the Mind-Body parallelism] applies to men no more than to other [non-human] individuals, which are all animate [*omnia . . . animata tamen sunt*], albeit in different degrees” (251; II p13s); hence, “nobody as yet has determined the limits of the body’s capabilities [*Etenim quid corpus possit*]: that is, nobody as yet has learned from experience what the body can and cannot do, without being determined by mind. . . . [E]xperience abundantly shows that solely from the laws of its nature many things occur which they would never have believed possible except from the direction of mind” (280-81; III p2c). Theory, utterly dehumanized, opens up a plan(e) of immanence for the Ethics-as-ethology,¹⁵ where the text

¹⁴ “This interview was granted by de Man on March 4, 1983 after the last of the ‘Messenger Lectures’ he gave at Cornell University” (*Resistance* 115)—hence, a *supplement* to the lectures.

¹⁵ Deleuze and Guattari have noted, “Spinoza asks: What can a body do? . . . In the same way that we avoided defining a body by its organs and functions, we will avoid defining it by Species or Genus characteristics;

occurs in an absolute way without being determined by the human, while a word *comme* “comme,” with its own animacy and capabilities (*conatus*), *performs* according to its own “perspectivism” (Viveiros de Castro)—just like the Tick in Jacob von Uexküll. But this is probably an Other story to tell on another occasion.

Ex-position
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Coda: Corpus and Conatus

“The anthropomorphization of knowledge, against which Nietzsche was later to rebel, is Vico’s project,” says Said in “Vico on the Discipline of Bodies and Texts” (*Reflections* 85). Here, obviously, “anthropomorphization” simply means “humanization” of the bestial bodies of the “first men” (“giants”) into the “princes of the gentile nations,” as is typically narrated in paragraph 340 of *The New Science*:

From this thought [of some divinity which imposed form and measure on the bestial passions, transforming them into human passions] must have sprung the *conatus proper to the human will*, to hold in check the motions impressed on the mind by the body, so as either to quiet them altogether, as becomes the wise man, or at least to direct them to better use, as becomes the civil man. This control over the motion of their bodies is certainly an effect of the freedom of human choice, and thus of free will, which is the home and seat of all the virtues, and among the others of justice. (101; emphasis added)

Said’s “anthropomorphization” is anything but the above-discussed “anthropomorphism” in de Man, whose deep-seated “in-difference”¹⁶ to the human is incommensurable with such a humanizing narrative. Besides, the parallel use of “conatus” and “human will” would have appalled Spinoza. In fact, Vico has earlier on held a more decent Cartesian understanding of the term (see *On the Most Ancient Wisdom of the Italians*, ch. 4), but he apparently “invented” this new connotation through the process of constructing his *New Science*. Following up on Vico’s “invention,” Said, in turn, goes as far as to identify “conatus” with “human will” unmediatedly: “this human property [i.e., “authority”] resides completely in an exercise of will, or conation” (*Beginnings* 358). Conatus, together with corpus,

instead we will seek to count its affects. This kind of study is called ethology, and this is the sense in which Spinoza wrote a true Ethics. . . . Von Uexküll, in defining animal worlds, looks for the active and passive affects of which the animal is capable in the individuated assemblage of which it is a part. For example, the Tick. . . .” (*A Thousand Plateaus* 256-57). See also Deleuze’s *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, esp. ch. 2.

¹⁶ See Rodolphe Gasché: “A rhetorical reading, for de Man, is, indeed, a reading that seeks the transgression of philosophical difference in an indifference that is so radical as to become entirely indifferent—devoid of all relation—to the philosophical” (51-52). One might as well substitute “the human” for “the philosophical.”

has been utterly humanized on the Vico-Said axis.

De Man's "body," just like Spinoza's "corpus," is never confined to the human. Nor is it organic or integral. In fact, it is most likely to be a dead body. In the Messenger Lecture on Kleist's *Über das Marionettentheater*, we are given a horrifying image of the marionettes "hanging and suspended like dead bodies" (*Rhetoric* 287). And when the lecturer talks of "this mechanical dance, which is also a dance of death and mutilation" (288), the audience will surely be forced to recall the (in)famous final pages of *Allegories of Reading*, where "the moment of dispossession in favor of the arbitrary power play of the signifier" is said to be experienced "as a dismemberment, a beheading or a castration" (296). Out of this slaughterhouse of the mutilated "text as body" emerges "the text as machine," devoid of any human desire, will, or freedom, which "performs anyway" (299). This "machine" that "performs anyway" is as close as you can get to Spinoza's *corpus* with *conatus* as its (individuated) essence.

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Descartes should no doubt be counted among those whom Foucault once called "founders of discursivity" who have produced "the possibilities and the rules for the formation of other texts" (114). No sooner have these possibilities and rules become "the model which has an independent, *a priori* existence" than "the normative fallacy" sets in: according to the fallacy, "the work should be other than it is; its only reality is its relationship to the model which was the very condition of its elaboration" (Macherey 18-19). Hence, *Cartesianism*. This is the way Theory begets various *-isms*. And yet, at the same time, Theory, it seems, begets its own resistance. Or, one might as well presume, Theory has the inherent tendency to unfold certain Other possibilities that might defy or deconstruct its own rules—*criticism* or *critique*. Vico, having bracketed the transcendent God and overturned the transcendental Cogito, "invented" a beginning of his own (*ars topica*) in the human body and history, so as to mount an "oppositional" criticism against Cartesian *ars critica*. Spinoza, on the other hand, "began by taking over the chief stronghold of his adversary . . . and redispersed the theoretical fortress in such a way as to turn it completely around, as one turns around cannons against the fortress's own occupant" (Althusser, "The Only Materialist Tradition" 11). In pure immanence, there is no "opposition" (between) but only difference (within), which demands *critique* rather than *criticism*.

As early as 1969, Edward W. Said, in his introduction to the co-translation of Auerbach's "Philologie der Weltliteratur," proclaimed his affiliation with the Vico-Auerbachian tradition of Philology-cum-Humanism, which "inaugurated the practice of historicism as well as vastly expanding the role of philology to include a study of all, or most, of human verbal activity," and placed philology, which

“treats contingent, historical truths at their basic level,” *before* philosophy, which “deals with eternal truths” (Auerbach, “Philology” 1-2). Philology as “the first investigative step” is then followed, as Said explicates Vico’s *New Science* in his 1975 *Beginnings*, by “a philosophy of authority.” Here, Said quotes paragraph 386, which defines human authority as “the property of human nature which not even God can take from man without destroying him” (*Beginnings* 358). Paul de Man, on the other hand, called himself “a philologist and not a philosopher” in the 1983 interview, for he had “a tendency to put upon texts an inherent authority” (*Resistance* 118)—Philology de(hu)Manized, as it were. The de Manian philologist has no human authority but the Text’s inherent authority, no “contingent, historical truths” to begin with but the-True-as-occurrence—nowhere to begin, no way to end, but the text-as-machine “performs anyway.” It seems that we are facing “the madness of literary criticism,” to borrow Jonathan Culler’s apt phrase as regards “[w]hat de Man calls reading.”¹⁷ Perhaps, *critique* is (in) the madness—as Derrida’s critique of Foucault occurs while treating the Cartesian Cogito for its madness.¹⁸ In *whatever* case, we only know it when it *occurs*. Meanwhile, Saidian *criticism* has been “vastly expanding the role” under the name of Cultural Studies.

Post Scriptum: Vico *sive* Spinoza

By titling this essay “Vico or Spinoza” and apparently putting Saidian secular *criticism* to the “test” by de Manian deconstructive *critique*, I may well have given the reader an impression that I am judging—placing critique over criticism—despite the disclaimer that “I do not mean to evaluate these two ‘critical’ positions.” Moreover, an astute reader will no doubt find that I myself may well be running “the latent risk of Saidian “oppositional” *criticism* . . . based on the identity-difference binarism without being tested by an immanent *critique* of that binary system itself” (my own words above). Perhaps I should have made clearer my take on Said’s conceptualization of “secular criticism,” so that it be shown that Saidian criticism may be *supplemented*, not opposed, by de Manian critique, and vice versa. My analysis of Said’s secular criticism is premised on the extraction of the two distinctive, if not necessarily contradictory, moments: *secularism* and *worldliness*. The former is, as I have discussed above, “an easy target” of deconstructive critique, whereas the latter can,

¹⁷ “What de Man calls reading—unflagging attention to what resists intelligibility, suspicion of the myriad totalizing procedures by which language is recuperated—undoes the figurations of literary criticism but cannot itself escape the recuperative process” (Culler 133).

¹⁸ Interestingly enough, Said, in the 1976 Vico paper, quotes Foucault’s rebuttal to Derrida’s critique at length in footnote 5 (*Reflections* 596), in order to criticize Derrida as the representative of “the whimsy of ingenious interpretation and system building.”

I believe, make a significant *topos* where criticism and critique would meet, albeit from opposite directions, if de Manian other-worldliness (i.e., the-True-as-occurrence) should constitute a *supplementary*, not “oppositional,” relation to Saidian worldliness.¹⁹

An exemplary case in point may again be found at the end of Said’s reading of Vico (this time together with Antonio Gramsci) in his 1982 *Critical Inquiry* piece, “Opponents, Audiences, Constituencies, and Community”:

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One last observation needs to be made. For Gramsci and Vico, interpretation must take account of this secular horizontal space only by means appropriate to what is present there. . . . The secular intellectual works to show the absence of divine originality and, on the other side, the complex presence of historical actuality. The conversion of the absence of religion into the presence of actuality is secular interpretation. (*Reflections* 131)

One may legitimately *criticize* de Man’s “other-worldly” theory of textuality for its inability to “show . . . the complex presence of historical actuality [i.e., worldliness].” However, the other task of the Saidian secular intellectual, “to show the absence of divine originality,” is—paradoxical as it may sound—no different from de Man’s *critique* of the all-pervasive, metaphysical presence of truth-as-trope by conceptualizing the-True-as-occurrence, in that the True that “will occur, will take place, will eventually take place, will eventually occur” (*Aesthetic* 132) is always already absent, yet-to-be-actualized—or, to be more precise, the True is only *virtually* present. In other words, the True has an *other* mode of presence, a *virtual* mode of presence on an immanent plane of worldliness. Other-worldliness exists, as it were, merely “on the other side” of worldliness—not “before, outside, above [*ante, extra, supra*]” but on the same and only immanent plane, merely in an *other* mode than “historical actuality.”

It is only when Said, in the immediately following sentence, appeals to the “conversion” of absence into presence that the two radically part ways. By the much-charged word “conversion,” Said apparently means a secularist, critical, self-conscious act of the human will, or “conation,” against which de Man would no doubt pit a deconstructive *critique* of the presence-absence binary opposition, just as Spinoza’s “conatus” does not allow any room for such oppositions. Critique here

¹⁹ See Derrida: “The supplement is neither a presence nor an absence. No ontology can think its operation. . . . [Unlike Rousseau, we are saying something else] to the extent that we designate the impossibility of formulating the movement of supplementarity in the classical logos, in the logic of identity, in ontology, in the opposition of presence and absence, positive and negative, and even in dialectics, if at least one determines it, as spiritualistic or materialistic metaphysics has always done, in the horizon of presence and reappropriation” (*Grammatology* 342).

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is not meant to criticize criticism from above or from the outside, but to teach criticism to stay *before* the secularist “conversion” so as to endure what Derrida calls “the experience of the aporia.” Derrida’s imperative that “one must avoid good conscience [*bonne conscience*] at all costs” seems most pertinent here:

Not only good conscience as the grimace of an indulgent vulgarity, but quite simply the assured form of self-consciousness [*conscience de soi*]: good conscience as subjective certainty is incompatible with the absolute risk that every promise [*gage*], every engagement, and every responsible decision—if there are such—must run. (*Aporias* 19)

What I have depicted as “the latent risk of Saidian ‘oppositional’ criticism” lies in such “good conscience,” which would evade “the absolute risk” (the moment of madness [*déraison*]) by virtue of “protect[ing] the decision or the responsibility by knowledge, by some theoretical assurance, or by the certainty of being right, of being on the side of science, of consciousness or of reason,” that is, by “transform[ing] this experience [of the aporia] into the deployment of a program, into a technical application of a rule or a norm, or into the subsumption of a determined ‘case’” (Derrida, *Aporias* 19)—in other words, by “conversion.”²⁰ It seems as if Derrida were suggesting that Saidian “critical consciousness” as a sort of worldly “good conscience” ought to be abandoned in order to enjoy the otherworldly “experience of the aporia.”

Not so. In fact, quite the contrary:

All these are conditions that must never be abandoned, of course, but that, as such, are only the guardrail of a responsibility to whose calling [*appel*] they remain radically heterogeneous. The affirmation that announced itself through a negative form was therefore the necessity of *experience* itself, the experience of the aporia (and these two words that tell of the passage and the nonpassage are thereby coupled in an aporetic fashion) as endurance or as passion, as

²⁰ Perhaps one may claim that this is the origin of Saidianism, but, I insist, it certainly does not constitute *the* radiant core of Said’s legacies, which, for instance, Gauri Viswanathan finds in “an extraordinary passage” of Said’s reading of Louis Massignon “that shows Said to be particularly responsive to those charismatic elements in religion that resist consensus and authority” (“Legacies” 7). It is of great significance that James Clifford’s celebrated review of *Orientalism* also finds the Massignon passages to be “the most interesting in his book” and “a crucial test case” for the contradiction of Said’s Foucauldian discourse analysis with his Humanistic faith in human singularity (262). Interestingly enough, Massignon is also to become a subject of Derrida’s 1996 seminars, in which this rather obscure figure is conjured up, together with Levinas, as paradigmatic of the idea of “hospitality” (“Hospitality” 365-80).

interminable resistance or remainder [*restance*]. (*Aporias* 19)

Saidian “secular criticism”—not the secularist opposition, but the critical-cum-worldly consciousness—must never be abandoned, of course, as it possesses necessary, worldly *beginnings*, while at the same time it must never be dis-possessed of de Manian critique’s haunting “calling”—the other-worldly calling of the-True-as-*occurrence* (i.e., *arrivant*) that remains immanent in, but “radically heterogeneous” to, worldliness. *Other*-worldliness is, in other words, not the *trans*-worldly opposition, but the *hetero*-worldly (that is, none the less worldly for its heterogeneity, not transcendence) “experience of the aporia”—a dangerous *supplement* that touches and is touched by the worldly experience of “historical actuality.” In this way, this *Other* way alone, we might be able to “invent” a *topos* where Saidian *criticism* and de Manian *critique* should meet, albeit coming from opposite directions—where “Vico or Spinoza” should be read *otherwise* as “Vico *sive* Spinoza,” after the manner of Spinoza’s “Deus *sive* Natura,” i.e., God *or* Nature.

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