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# The Finitude of Method: Mourning Theory from the New Criticism to the New Vitalism

“Could it be possible! This old hermit in the forest has not yet heard of it, that *God is dead!*”

—Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (35; trans. modified)

Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind.

—Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (A51/B76)

The language of obsessive-compulsive neurosis is, as it were, a dialect of the hysterical language

—Freud, *Remarks on a Case of Obsessive-Compulsive Neurosis* (*Studienausgabe* 7: 36; my translation)

There is a great difference, whether the poet seeks the particular for the general or sees the general in the particular. From the first arises allegory . . . True symbolism is where the particular represents the more general . . . as a living momentary revelation of the Inscrutable.

—Goethe, *Maxims* (qtd. in Fletcher 13)

THE RETURN OF POLITICIZED RELIGION since the 1980s, which troubles those of us who cling to the notion of modernity as necessary secularization, requires that we reconceptualize recent humanities methodology in terms that account for its connections with the history of religious and philosophical politics. From Reaganism to fundamentalisms to the current Tea-Party movement, global religio-political neoconservatism should prompt us to rethink the ways in which apparently secular methodological tendencies and dogmas may repeat aspects of an early, incomplete secularization. For only the consciously self-critical completion of its secularization could protect contemporary theory in principle from the neoconservative accusation that it has not outgrown its dependence on irrational and dogmatic faith commitments. However, one cannot

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complete such secularization—by which I mean overcome or escape from religious and metaphysical frameworks—without first reconsidering the potential modalities of one’s continued attachment to those frameworks.<sup>1</sup> While various schools of post-World War II thought have pursued this project from multiple points of view, their efforts do not free us from the necessity of renewing and reconsidering those attempts. I broach one such renewal and reconsideration here by reviewing the main post-World War II methodological movements in the literary humanities—beginning with the installation of the New Criticism—against the background of the history of secularization in the early Enlightenment (the age of absolutist monarchy), with its subordination of church to state, and the ensuing separation of the two. In addition to the New Criticism, I consider: (post)structuralism; New Historicism and Cultural Studies (which I group together as closely related historicisms, the latter arising more or less seamlessly out of the former); and what I call—with more critical than celebratory intent—the “New Vitalism,” a heading under which I include some recent post-Cultural Studies tendencies (especially the work of Giorgio Agamben and Slavoj Žižek) in which religious arguments resurface.

My overarching claim is that these methodological movements in the humanities since World War II are displaced repetitions of moments in the early modern mourning for lost absolutes (or absolute values as forms or images of totalized infinity), a mourning that is today, as its repetitions reveal, far from complete. Because these four methodological tendencies spell out in general terms the alphabet of possibilities for contemporary criticism, however, it is not yet possible to approach them from any standpoint that entirely transcends them. The best one can do is to describe each of them, in a consciously regulated way, from the several perspectives they constitute when taken together. My point of departure concerning these perspectives is itself, for the most part, noncontroversial: the New Criticism focuses on formal traits; structuralism promotes a rational epistemology; New Historicism/Cultural Studies privileges history; and the New Vitalism privileges “life” (for Žižek it is the life of the psychoanalytic subject, for Agamben it is *zoē*). In what follows, I provide a schematic description of each of these movements in terms of form, epistemology, historical inscription, and implied psychoanalytic subject position (see tables 1 and 2). I displace their perspectives to the extent that I distance myself from the excessive claims each movement makes for a perspective that tends to be implicitly absolutized—religion in the guise of intellectual trend—by its most emphatic proponents. My goal is the mutual relativization of these four methodological movements rather than their fulfillment in an achieved totalization or an annihilation of their partial claims to our attention. Nonetheless, I do privilege a specific, if diffuse, *historical* occurrence: the modern loss of absolute, transcendent foundations, from which I argue that there follow epistemological and rhetorical-stylistic consequences that psychoanalytic categories help us to describe in turn as strategies for dealing with loss.

I begin with a brief historical sketch of the background constituted by the early modern “death of God” (the privatization and relativization of the absolute that makes Nietzsche’s later pronouncement possible and necessary). I then recall the

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<sup>1</sup> Against the secularization thesis in Carl Schmitt, and also at a distance from Hans Blumenberg’s response in *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, I presuppose here that one does not have to deny that modernity secularizes in order to argue for its legitimacy.

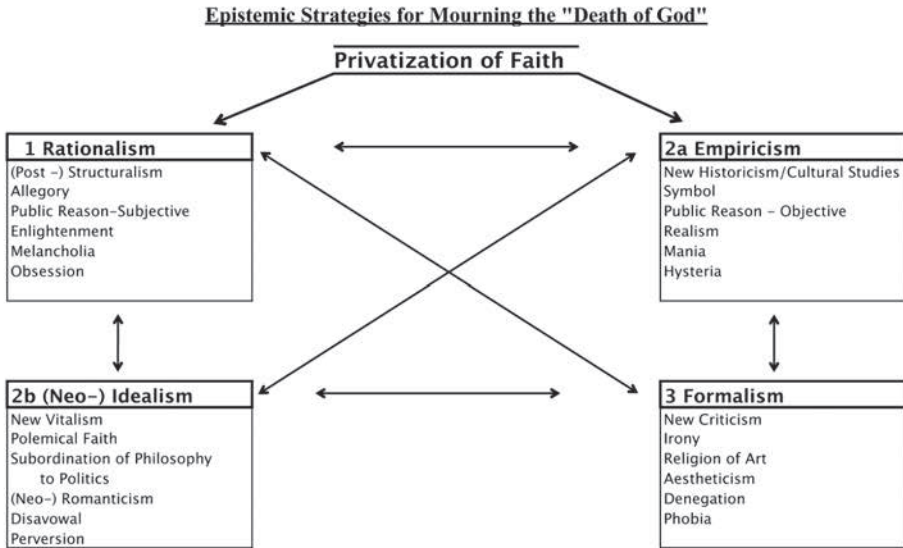


Table 1

Crucial Dimensions of Post-WWII Humanities Methods						
Dimensions Tendencies in Humanities Method	Privileged Representational form	Privileged Epistemological Orientation	Historical Aspects		Subjectivity	
			Corresponding Early Modern Position on Church and State	Corresponding Period in Modern History of Ideas	Response to Loss of the Absolute	Subjective Structure
New Criticism	Irony	Critique	Separationism: Privatized "Religion" (of Art)	Aestheticism	Denegation	Phobia
(Post-) Structuralism	Allegory	Rationalism	Separationism: Public Reason-Subjective (Truth as Self-Certainty)	Enlightenment	Melancholia	Obsession
New Historicism and Cultural Studies	Symbol	Empiricism	Separationism: Public Reason-Objective (Truth as Adequation)	Realism	Mania	Hysteria
New Vitalism	Polemic as Faith in Presence	(Neo-) Idealism	Absolutism: Subordination of church to state (Truth as Faith)	(Neo-) Romanticism	Disavowal	Perversion

Table 2

context of post-World War II religious politics in the United States, before proceeding to the discussion of humanities methodology from the New Criticism on.

**Modern Methodology as a Work of Mourning (the Slow Death of God)**

The "slow death" of God (see Berlant) is announced silently—and prior to the full unfolding of early modern philosophical discourse—in the division of the Christian Church effected by Lutheran *sola fide* during the first half of the sixteenth century. This division initiates a movement toward internalization that will culminate (despite the fact that Luther certainly intended no such thing) in the

modern privatization and relativization of all absolutes. The subordination of church to state that concludes the Thirty Years War in 1648 already *implies* the privatization of religion, even if initially the only persons who possess the right to such a privatization are the absolute monarchs. The Enlightenment discourse of “tolerance,” however, would extend this right and obligation in principle to all human beings. The modern individual thus becomes in this respect an absolute monarch in a realm occupied by only one (split or self-conscious) subject, the (quasi-monarchic) bourgeois himself (cf. Kosellek). A man’s home, as they say . . .

The privatization of religion entails also its relativization, however, and this leads ultimately to the liberal “nihilism” widely decried by neoconservatives today.<sup>2</sup> And the internalization of the absolute in turn reverses itself into the absolutization of arbitrary subjective impulses or internal “states.” As a result, the politics of feeling has repeatedly reasserted itself from the late eighteenth century Counter-Enlightenment to the neoconservative and fundamentalist (or otherwise identitarian) rehabilitations of political religion in our own day: from Werther’s sufferings to Bush’s War on Terror to the recent resurgence of vitalistic theory (in which “feeling” reappears as “jouissance” or “Being”).

Prior to the emergence of the (antimodern) Counter-Enlightenment, however, the Enlightenment attempted to replace the lost absoluteness of the formerly “revealed” public (but henceforth particular, private, and relativized) absolute with the “religion of reason” proposed by Lessing, Kant, and others. In this sense, modern reason supplements the loss of the absolute. Because its articulation comprises a process of *mourning* for the lost foundation, modern theory thus arises paradoxically in order to mourn theory’s loss—that is, the loss of itself as the loss of its own totalized infinity, its transcendent ground and horizon. Any meta-theory must thus include thought about how theory mourns (theory).

Modern philosophical reason—arising in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as a process of (in part anticipatory) mourning for the lost absolute foundation—takes two principal opposed forms: rationalism and empiricism. Given its focus on the subject as primary source of knowledge, rationalism initially entails an incorporation of, and identification with, the lost (divine-paternal-phallic) object. As Freud puts it, in mourning “the testing of reality has shown that the beloved object no longer exists, and issues the command to withdraw all libido from its connections with this object. . . . the free libido was not displaced onto another object, but rather pulled back into the ego . . . to constitute an Identification of the ego with the abandoned object” (3: 198, 203; my translation).<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> F.H. Jacobi intuits this around 1800, launching the modern history of the term “nihilism” with reference to Fichtean Idealism, which he characterizes as an inverted repetition of Spinozan materialism.

<sup>3</sup> Birnbaum (42–43) argues that Descartes’ position implies melancholia in the Freudian sense. When she adds the qualification that Descartes lacks the self-abnegation that follows from identification with a lost object, however, she considers only the case of the world as object and overlooks the self-accusations involved in Descartes’ repeated denunciations of his own subjection to total illusion and the persecutory figure of the evil genius itself. While it goes without saying that, with his famous proofs of God’s existence, Descartes was trying to recover a God he feared dead, his attempt to prove God by “natural reason” presupposes a questioning of biblical revelation. Further, the hypothesis of the evil genius itself posits the nonexistence of the divine foundation, and the existence of God is based in the third Meditation on the presence of His idea in the mind, whose self-certain existence becomes thereby prior. Of course, the notion that modern rationalism tries to mourn the passage of the God it is in the process of killing is manifestly all the more plausible in the case of Spinoza, who was generally regarded as an atheist for the first 150 years of his reception, and was also one of the first to argue (in the *Theological-Political Tractate*) for a historical biblical criticism.

The *ego cogito* of rationalism posits itself as a foundation analogous to God, a foundation it grounds subsequently in the demonstration of God's existence.

But this rationalist foundation soon (and inevitably) begins to seem problematic; the internalized absolute—who now says “I”—appears as a relative term, still or already dead or dying. Freud: “the shadow of the object fell thus upon the ego, which could now be judged . . . as the abandoned object. In this way, the object-loss had transformed itself into a loss of the ego” (3: 203). The epistemological subject thus turns manically outward and “goes out like a ravenously hungry person toward new object-investments” (3: 208). Modern empiricism thus formulates itself as the search of a blank mind for perceptual objects on which to base a knowledge of the world that can be shared by all. The (phallic-paternal-divine) object, as *Ersatz*-absolute, is here something one seeks to (re)appropriate, to *have* (again) in the mode of empirical knowledge, rather than to *be*. I will return to this when contrasting poststructuralism with New Historicism/Cultural Studies below.

### Subjective Structures and Formal-Representational Modes

These melancholic and manic responses to loss also correspond to enduring subjective structures and formal-representational modes. On the one side, the rationalist orientation that corresponds to the depressive pole of mourning bears a close resemblance, like depression itself, to *obsessive-compulsive* formations (see Abraham). Once “I” has replaced “God,” the question of whether or not God is dead reasserts itself as the typical question of the obsessional—“Am I alive or dead?”—which also asserts itself in the questions driving rationalist discourses concerning the possibility and method of self-certainty. (Consider, for example, the following passage in Descartes' Second Meditation: “I am; I exist—this is certain. But for how long? For as long as I am thinking; for perhaps it could also come to pass that *if I were to cease all thinking I would then utterly cease to exist*” [65; emphasis added]). Like rationalism, obsession clings in its uncertainty to the (Lacanian) symbolic order in a kind of absolute fidelity to the universal.<sup>4</sup> It privileges thought over the body as its favored symptomatic domain, and it takes flight from desire and the particular (in which it senses the death it fears) through formalization and ritualization.

At the other extreme, the empiricist orientation, arising as a manic flight from identification of the self with a dead or dying universality, is akin to *hysteria*. It approaches the symbolic law (again in the Lacanian sense) with a skeptical eye. In accordance with its absolute fidelity to the particular, it possesses an acute awareness of the dimension of lack associated with universal structures, the “love” or unifying power of which it fears in itself. It tends to somaticize, to express itself on the level of the body (focusing on perception of objects) as the nonconceptualizable space of what is the only remaining credible thing.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> I owe this formulation to Andrew Cutrofello's response to an earlier draft of this essay.

<sup>5</sup> In “Reason Split into Rationalism and Empiricism” I argue that Freud developed in “Neurosis and Psychosis” the analogy according to which rationalism (or philosophy) is to empiricism (or science) as psychosis is to neurosis (169ff, 181 n. 12). The psychosis-neurosis opposition arguably repeats itself in displaced form *within* neurosis as the obsession-hysteria opposition, in which the effacement of reality due to the eroticization of thought confronts the overvaluation of reality through somatization of the repressed. In “Neurosis and Psychosis” Freud explicitly determines that the neurosis-psychosis borderline is a narcissistic structure related to melancholy.

The rationalist-obsessive and the empiricist-hysterical positions further imply (and are entailed by) distinct approaches to representation. Each tries to acknowledge and limit lack by separating the figural from the literal in a particular way. If we proceed in the empiricist manner, we posit that any general notion is an abstraction whose status is *figural*, a mere derivative “possibility” or “idea,” while the specific instances (or cases) function as the *literal*, or original and concrete, “reality.” If on the other hand we take the “high” rationalist road of pure “theory” or “thought,” then we take as *literal* the conceptual determinations that constitute our point of departure. We choose to see these concepts as the epistemological foundation or ground of the particular cases, which appear to us as essentially *figural*, metaphorical derivatives—and all the more so the more particular or concrete they are.

Given their ontorhetorical presuppositions, these broad epistemological approaches imply or correspond to distinct representational (or “poetic”) modes. A way of trying to know should, after all, be connected to a way of representing. Accordingly, the empiricist (and hysterical) passage from literal concretion to (a never stable) figural abstraction takes, as its appropriate form, the *symbolic* mode (here *not* in the Lacanian sense) that was proposed in Romantic and post-Romantic literature as the ideal of literary-poetic representation (see Sørensen). Beginning with the concrete, one teases out its more general implications, which may remain only suggestive connotations because these implications are merely the derivative and figural aspects of the concrete, sensuous, and perceptual foundations of human consciousness. In contrast, the rationalist (and obsessional) passage from literal abstraction to figural concretion is the philosophical equivalent of the literary-formal mode of *allegory*, which invents concrete figures as subordinate presentations of abstract entities taken to be prior in importance (cf. Fletcher 279–303). In both types of epistemological (and desiring or ethical) orientation and corresponding literary-aesthetic mode, the particular case functions as what we can call an *example*. However, whereas in the empiricist case the example can be called *exemplary* because it provides the basis from which the generalization, concept, or law is derived, in the rationalist case the example functions as mere *illustration*.

### Mourning God from Early Modernity through the Totalitarian Ideologies

The interplay between these two attempts to assimilate the death of God—even if various rationalists and empiricists retain the reference to (the slowly dying) God in different ways—comprises the development of modern philosophy up to and even beyond the Kantian attempt to mediate by bracketing the thing-in-itself.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The positing of the “transcendental object” as inaccessible to our experience—the bracketing of the “thing itself”—is Kant’s way of trying to complete the mourning for the lost absolute begun in rationalist melancholia and empiricist mania, whose claims he suspends in his discussion of the four “antinomies” of pure reason (in the first *Critique*), where he shows that the dogmatic (rationalist) and skeptical (empiricist) positions both contradict and imply each other. But the oscillation in the antinomies reasserts itself in a problematic manner as the unresolved tension between the empiricism of the theoretical Understanding and the rationalism of the practical Reason, which posits what ought to be without regard for what is. The end point of Kant’s critical system is the “resolution” of this tension or oscillation in the famous “Mittelglied” of the reflexive judgment (aesthetic and/or teleological) in the *Kritik der Urteilskraft*. The reflexive experiences of the beautiful (and sublime) and organic nature become the site for a muted recovery of the absolute foundation. This recovery is echoed in turn by the organicist aestheticism of the New Critics.

Modern thought will never quite manage to exceed the tension between these two ways of coming to terms with the loss of an objective absolute. To be sure, in the *Critique of Judgment* Kant's attempt culminates with the harmonious interplay (or undecidability) between image and concept in the aesthetic-teleological experience. But Kantian aesthetic-teleological judgment also remains the site of the *enduring splitting* of consciousness. German Idealism's response to Kant is twofold: the philosophy of Fichte, which is rationalist, or ego-centered, and remains epistemologically focused (although through an epistemology of positing, or *Setzung*); and the philosophy of Schelling, which is akin to empiricism insofar as it puts nature in the place of the absolute ego. Hegel will attempt to overcome this opposition in the name of history, Wagner in the name of myth, and the modern totalitarian ideologies and states (following Hegel and a Leninized Marx on the one hand, Wagner and a distorted Nietzsche on the other) in the name of a political-theological totality as classless society or biologically grounded nation. But the defeat of fascism and the critique of Stalinism will then apparently confirm the failure of any such attempt to recover the absolute politically. During—and especially after—World War II, the New Criticism will draw upon the Kantian notion of aesthetic autonomy in order to reassert secularism as a would-be non-ideological version of culture.

### **The Reassertion of Separationism in the Postwar United States**

I am arguing in this essay that after World War II—that is, from the defeat of fascism and the installation of Cold War anti-communism through the fall of state socialism and the neoliberal aftermath—methodologies in the literary humanities *recapitulate* the main formulations of Enlightenment reason (while redefining the secular literary canon) in its Kantian, rationalist, and empiricist modes before returning (in the New Vitalism) to a kind of implicitly neo-absolutist gesture. I am also suggesting that, with the exception of the New Vitalism, they do so in an attempt to renew and reaffirm the modern liberal social contract that totalitarian regimes had intended to reverse (in fascism) or supercede (in communism) (cf. Stevens). In the United States, on which I focus here, this recapitulation occurs within the context of a broader return to religion in the early 1950s, followed by a crisis of religion in the sixties and seventies that led in turn to the apparent resurgence of religion in the eighties (see Sorauf).

Three aspects of these complex developments are crucial for what follows. First, the Protestant establishment dissolves after World War II—and the word “establishment” is here to be understood in the sense of a quasi-state-determined church (Sorauf 10). Second, as the history of legal appeals and especially Supreme Court cases illustrates, from the 1950s through the 1970s there is a strong reassertion of the separation of church and state (always accompanied, of course, by a resistance to that separation) prior to the partial reversal of this process since the mid-1980s (Sorauf 370). The strong and sudden development of separationist positions in constitutional law is consistent with the erosion of Protestant hegemony and the emergence of the Civil Rights movement, because this development is analogous to—and indeed draws upon and repeats crucial aspects of—the displacement of seventeenth-century absolutism (with its state-determined churches)

by Enlightenment discourses of tolerant rationality (see Maclear and, on debate in the early 1960s, Oaks). Third, the growth of separationist constitutional law from the 1950s to the 1970s occurs by way of Supreme Court cases that almost always concern the religious politics of schools, colleges, and universities. Education is thus at the center of this renewal of the separation of church and state. For all of these reasons, the fact that literary scholarship in this period continues to rework early modern philosophical method—to redo its work of separation and mourning—indicates more than a continuity of intellectual traditions or analogies on the level of the history of ideas. It illustrates (displaced) repetition in the history of religio-political ideologies, institutions, and laws.

### “Neo-Kritizismus,” Irony, Phobia: New Criticism

Philosophically speaking, the New Criticism is on the one hand frankly empiricist. In the work of I.A. Richards, for example, the critic’s desire is turned toward the experience of the poet. The critic wants to renew this experience as an experience of the work, but an inner experience that is formally mediated and idealized. More generally in New Criticism, the critic’s desire is turned to the poetic object as isolated from all other objects or theories that might surround it (see De Man, *Blindness* 229–45; and Brooks, *Well-Wrought Urn* x). On the other hand, in its embrace of the autonomous artwork, its interest in formal reflection, and its disinterested stance, the New Criticism incorporates rationalist elements (see Brooks, *Well-Wrought Urn* xi). It remains at one remove from a naïve—e.g. Herderian—embrace of the given. Taking these two aspects together—and even if the direct influence of Kant’s third *Critique* may not be prominently or constantly in evidence—the position of the New Critics is akin to that proposed in Kant’s aesthetics. Kant is commonly taken to have broached the idea of aesthetic autonomy, and in the New Criticism one focuses on an interplay between the experienced object and its form in a disinterested reflection on the decontextualized work.

Although in terms of representational modes the New Criticism owes its greatest allegiance to the Romantic doctrine of the symbol, because its approach to the artwork frequently stresses the interplay of opposites, ambiguities, paradoxes, and tensions, we can best characterize it as an *ironic* criticism (see Jancovich 22, 170 n26; Brooks, “Irony”). Just as in the work of Friedrich Schlegel and the other early German Romantics who develop Kantian aesthetic reflection in this direction, irony turns back upon itself in an endlessly circular play of self-reflection, thereby cutting itself off from the world outside as it endlessly completes the work’s infinite organic wholeness, so the formalist focus of New Criticism is “unified” in a disjunctive synthesis with its empiricist focus on the individual work as objectively given artefact.<sup>7</sup>

Terry Eagleton has characterized New Criticism as the ideology of a “defensive intelligentsia” (47). From a Freudian perspective, such an ideology appears to be *phobic* (see Freud, *Studienausgabe* 1: 394–97; 3: 115 ff.). Whether in the early defense of poetic discourses and values against the value-less sphere of science, or later in

<sup>7</sup> Given the New Critical reconciliation of formalism with hermeneutics, the type of “irony” we find in their work is clearly *not* the radical type that de Man describes in, among other places, “The Rhetoric of Temporality” (*Blindness and Insight*, 187–228).



the attempt to avoid political positions defined by World War II and then Cold War ideological tensions, the New Criticism withdraws from a dangerous context into the safety of the organically whole work as embodiment of absolute value.<sup>8</sup> The anxiety of not being able to act—don't be a fascist, don't be a communist, don't be a capitalist, don't be a scientist—is symptomatized through reaction formation ("it's good to turn away from the world") as the disappearance of the reading subject into the work, which is in turn the exemplary subjectivity of the great poet's experience of natural beauty, wholeness, and life. The phobic position—whose status with respect to diagnostic categories remains indeterminate in Freud—is one that here hovers between hysterical and obsessional anxiety, the latter involving the flight from the particularity that evokes forbidden aggression against the (paternal) legal principle, the former referring to the fear of the primal-scene in the face of the possible (failure of) seduction. For example, in the extensive New Critical discussion of the "dissociation of sensibility" beginning with T.S. Eliot, this critical discourse presents itself as the fear of a disarticulation of subjectivity into what became henceforth two exteriorities: abstract thought and particularized feeling (Eliot 247; see, also, Hulme, Brooks, Fogle, Wimsatt, and Frye in Gleckner and Enscoe). From this (phobic) stance, the New Criticism acknowledges secularization—the splitting or dissociation of the subject into its universality and its particularity—but places it at a distance by tending toward the sacralization of the artwork as a work of creation without an explicit creator. The authorial genius is bracketed by asserting its distance from biographical criticism or "life-and-works" literary historiography, and the reader must in principle also efface him/herself before the work. This position thus recalls the Freudian mechanism of "denegation" or *Verneinung*, which balances acknowledgement with denial—unlike "disavowal" or *Verleugnung*, which (as I discuss below) first grants, but then rejects, what it cannot assimilate.

In the Anglo-American critical ideology of close reading, then, autonomous art takes a neo-criticist position (in the sense of a renewal of Kantian critical-aesthetic reflection) that has its principal rhetorical correlative in irony and its most plausible psychoanalytic translation in phobic denegation. By the end of the 1950s, however, this stance begins to undo itself. The intrinsic dynamic of theory leads, on the one hand, to a more extended theorization of formalist possibilities (evidenced, for example, by Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*), which pushes toward a rationalist systematization, an Anglo-American "structuralism" (see Lentricchia 3–26; and Hartman, esp. 14–23). On the other hand, Anglo-American critical discourse turns tentatively outward, toward both the appropriation of Continental models of thought and the acceptance of the notion that the work (like Anglo-American criticism itself) might be embedded in a context that exceeds it. This context, however, is initially—in the history of methodological movements we are retracing—the formal one provided by a linguistic and literary structuralism that shares with New Criticism a formal focus even as it differentiates itself from the New Critics' hermeneutic empiricism (see LeSage 22, 9, 11, *passim*). In accordance with the pervasive Cold War anxiety about totalitarianism

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<sup>8</sup> On Wimsatt and Beardsley's "Affective Fallacy" and related essays, see Siebers 36–46, who shows that the "anxieties and fears" with respect to the dangers of rhetorical persuasion in the service of charismatic leadership are at the center of these critics' analyses of affective rhetoric.

and ideology more generally (especially prior to the countercultural revolt, and then against it), the shift from New Criticism to structuralism largely avoids material or substantial contexts—the most obvious candidates being the national- and class-historical ones that are tainted at the time by the inimical proximity of fascism and communism—and turns instead to context (whether diachronic or synchronic) in its formal and theoretical dimension: as language and, more generally, as conceptual paradigm. In addition, structuralism gives literary criticism an objective and scientific allure that compensates for the perceived subjective individualism of literary studies, thereby providing at least an imaginary gain in social legitimacy within the framework of secular rationality.

### **Neo-rationalism, Allegory, Obsession: Structuralism through Deconstruction**

In terms of its philosophical-epistemological orientation, structuralism, whose definitive arrival in the United States was signaled by the conference on “The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man” at Johns Hopkins in 1966, presents us with a displaced renewal of *rationalism*. To be sure, this is a rationalism more akin to Spinoza than to Descartes in that it situates the individual subject in a larger structural “substance,” but it is a rationalism nonetheless. Eschewing or marginalizing history, structuralism tends also to replace the subject of conscious intention with a system—linguistic, then socio-cultural or literary—that lies at its foundation (see, for example, Piaget). Difference replaces identity (for example, the self-identity of the organic work) and relation replaces element (for example, the element of a given poetic experience) as the proper “object” of knowledge and generative source of meaning-effects. The conceptualization of differential relations as general laws of transformation becomes the ground of knowledge in place of the observation of particulars. The formal-materialist project of structuralism takes as its methodological focus the rational universal, to which the individual cases, as elements of a system or individual realizations of its functioning, relate in principle only as illustrative examples.

On the level of formal representational or literary modes, structuralism (which finds its extreme limit in deconstruction) approaches the relation between general and particular in *allegorical* terms. Because structuralism is tendentially epistemologically oriented (and so often bad-mouthed as “high-theory”), it always attempts to subordinate the particulars of linguistic, textual, and social-cultural history to the mastering instance of the theoretical models they serve to illustrate. It tells the story of a structure. In its linguistic starting point with Saussure and his followers, it prefers the synchronic totality of language as system to the diachronic unfolding of a history, especially as a semantically oriented history such as had been the focus of philological language approaches in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Analogously, it privileges the general structure of language over the particular speech act that actualizes language. In literary-critical structuralism, poetics—or the system of rules governing the possibilities of text production—gains ascendancy over hermeneutics, which is oriented toward the reconstruction of the meanings of individual works (see Culler, *Structuralist Poetics*).

By an apparent paradox, this entails that the reader seems to dominate the author—and to a distressing degree for those schooled in the New Criticism.

But the reader here is only a conduit for poetological codes. These codes dismember the “work” (or show it to be a “text” constitutively dismembered by the multiplicity of its own possible generative systems) rather than restore its integrity qua “work,” a category whose claims to “organic unity” structuralists regard with suspicion (see, for example, Barthes). The distance between such over-reading and hermeneutics can be gauged in the work of Paul de Man.<sup>9</sup> In his late essays, especially from *Allegories of Reading* on, texts appear explicitly as allegorical narratives not only about their own writing and/or reading, but—more disturbingly—about the impossibility of such reflection. What we read there is the impossibility of reading—that is, the impossibility of an *empirical* ascent from the particulars of the text to its adequate interpretive conceptualization, or the impossibility of the transformation of a figural network into a persuasion that is consistent with that network.

Finally, from the standpoint of psychoanalytic diagnostic categories or subjective positions, structuralism appears as *obsessional*. Just as, for Freud, obsessional subjectivity eroticizes thought—indeed, this is one of his main formulations of its distinguishing symptom—so structuralist rationalism focuses principally on (epistemological) method and leads to the celebration of the “advent of theory.” However, because the obsessional modality comprises an extended hesitation, a persistent substitution-disorder—note that in the Ratman case and elsewhere Freud characterizes *Verschiebung* (displacement) as obsession’s principal figure—structuralism and to some extent also poststructuralism seem to hesitate endlessly before actually providing a reading of a text or a history, much less a proposal for action that would not be conceived as infratextual (see, for example, Culler, *Flaubert*). Or if the structuralist obsessional does act, she or he tends to overdo the perfecting of the action to the point of destroying the product. Consider the cases of Levi-Strauss and Roman Jakobson in their grammatical readings of poetry, or Roland Barthes in *S/Z*, where Balzac’s text disappears into the multiplication of its possibilities as dictated by a plurality of points of view. The structuralist analysis completes itself, if not as *Sarrasine*, then as *chef d’œuvre inconnu*.

In short, structuralism shares with obsession—to the exasperation of its critics—an overwhelming *ambivalence* (the key to a certain “sophistication”). This ambivalence can be seen all the way from Saussure’s notion of language as a system of differences to the “neither/nor and both” with which Derridian deconstruction approaches every binary opposition in the Western metaphysical tradition, including the opposition between overcoming and remaining within this tradition. And of course such obsessiveness also characterizes (despite his objections; see *Rhetoric* 239–42) Paul de Man’s attempt to demonstrate the impossibility of reading by ascending from textual particulars to the generalities of meaning, not to mention acting on the world in a rationally guided manner. If after his death it became clear that this position had been overdetermined all along by the fascist engagement of his early adulthood—an engagement he spent the rest

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<sup>9</sup> While de Man’s career passed through phenomenology, New Criticism, and structuralism, and while his particular strength consisted in the distance he was able to preserve with respect to all of these movements, his commitment to deconstruction in the last phase of his career situates him at the place of the self-dismantling and self-overcoming of structuralism. For example, when he speaks, in “Semiology and Rhetoric,” of the necessity of some “preventative semiological hygiene” (*Allegories* 6), the ironic tone does not cancel the seriousness with which he takes structuralist semiology, even if he invokes it to show how its reconciliation of grammar with rhetoric is illusory.

of his life, I believe, silently mourning and attempting to prevent himself and others from repeating—this trajectory helps make explicit the way in which structuralism and especially deconstruction are responses to the totalitarian suspension of the separation of church and state, private and public spheres, a separation whose origins can be found in a rationalist and radically secular critique of totalitarian absolutes and sacralized naturalisms of all kinds.<sup>10</sup>

### Neo-empiricism, Symbol, Hysteria: New Historicism through Cultural Studies

Starting in 1983—the year of the birth of *Representations* and the death of Paul de Man—literary criticism turned from the rationalist and obsessional tendencies of structuralism and deconstruction to (what I will characterize as) the empiricist, symbolist/realist, and hysterical project of New Historicism and its extension in Cultural Studies.<sup>11</sup> The turn was “salutary,” given the relative ahistoricism not only of so much (post)structuralist theory but—more broadly and dangerously—of the ideology of America as the land of the new and, consequently, as the land of idealized amnesia. In addition, the residue of the affirmative culture of New Criticism in the (post)structuralist moment was not inconsiderable, especially in English studies, although in some other language fields it may have been less predominant. (In German Studies, for instance, the traditions of historicism and Marxism, along with the weight of the Nazi past, made it more difficult to ignore history, even when “textimmanent” criticism came into vogue in Germany during the first postwar period.) Furthermore, with the rise of the new right in 1980, structuralism widely came to seem politically impotent at best. The rationalist universalism characteristic of structuralism came to seem less like Enlightenment tolerance than like an effacement of particular identities, a repetition of the absolutist negation of religious multiplicity by the state churches in the seventeenth century.

New Historicist/Cultural Studies attempts to renew the split between public universality and private particularity by asserting the political character of the personal. Its investment in *empiricism* is a crucial aspect of this project.<sup>12</sup> Historical

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<sup>10</sup> For a partially historicizing discussion of de Man’s mobilization of the term “ambivalence,” see Arac, who situates de Man’s preference for “ambivalence” within his attempt to avoid all value judgments, a problematic attempt to the degree that de Man ends up emphatically supporting ambivalence as a supreme value. Arac also comments about the way in which de Man “obsessively” returns to a small number of texts across his career (129). See, also, Hertz, who finds in de Man’s work the form “of obsession . . . a pathos of uncertain agency” played out “in compulsively repeated figures” (100) and notes that the “elective embodiment of the pathos of uncertain agency is the specular structure” (102).

<sup>11</sup> Although in its British tradition the history of Cultural Studies goes back at least to the works of Raymond Williams in the late 1950s and the founding of the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham in 1964, I am focusing here principally on the U.S. context. For the early debates on New Historicism, see Veeseer, and for a snapshot of Cultural Studies a few years later, see Grossberg et al.

<sup>12</sup> Although an avid proponent of the New Historicism (which he already called “cultural studies” [15]), Louis A. Montrose (“Professing the Renaissance: The Poetics and Politics of Culture,” in Veeseer 15–36) acknowledged that the reluctance of New Historicists to “theorize” their “practices” was “symptomatic of certain eclectic and empiricist tendencies that threatened to undermine any attempt to distinguish a new historicism from an old one” (18). But as soon as one leaves empiricism behind one runs into the opposite danger: a failure to distinguish New Historicism from (post)structuralism. Indeed, one loses history altogether. See Fox-Genovese, “Literary Criticism and the Politics of New Historicism” (in Veeseer 213–24).

events, actual institutional and discursive structures (rather than merely theoretical or linguistic ones), and the play of power in class, gender, and race become, in literary studies and beyond, the privileged objects of historical description. Particularity (from the anecdotal to the documentary to the collected display to the marginalized voice)—and not the general model—is where it's at. The exemplary example now dominates—is prior to—its possible theorization. The contexts of things become real rather than theoretical and are situated in things themselves (even if the things are intermittently called “texts”) and their concrete unfolding over time, rather than in (what are now seen increasingly as “mere”) theoretical and systematic possibilities for the understanding of things. For example, in “Cultural Studies: An Introduction” (1–18), Grossberg, Nelson, and Treichler emphasize the importance of “context” so repeatedly that it becomes arguably *the* determining concept or signifier of Cultural Studies, especially since the authors claim that Cultural Studies has no particular objects or methods. Context is associated here with specificity, practice, historicity, concreteness, materiality, sociality, popularity, interestedness, and struggle, as opposed to generality, theory, abstraction, ideality, elitism, disinterestedness, and so on. In one formulation that comes close to a definition, the editors propose that Cultural Studies will always delineate “specific practices” in “specific contexts” insofar as such practices determine the distinction between high and popular (or everyday) culture: “cultural studies requires us to identify the operation of specific practices, of how they continuously reinscribe the line between legitimate and popular culture, and of what they accomplish in specific contexts. At the same time, cultural studies must constantly interrogate its own connection to contemporary relations of power, its own stakes” (13). Meaning is thus sought in the description—often understood as active intervention—of the specific contexts of a struggle for power in which cultural artefacts and practices emerge and transform themselves.

But as contexts are both at some distance from what they surround and (in principle) infinitely indeterminable (or redeterminable), the question of whether meaning can ever emerge through concrete contextualization remains (especially in the wake of Jacques Derrida's work) an open one at best. And history without meaning is certainly not what most Cultural Studies scholars intend, at least to the degree that they would claim their work is meaningful. The question of how the context coheres—the German word *Zusammenhang* nicely highlights this question because it means both “context” and “coherence” or “cohesion”: literally “hanging together”—is not resolved simply by further references to the term “context.” Indeed, an analysis for which “context” is the last word will have to be one that ultimately embraces the opacity of the given, even if the very “contextuality” of the given lends it for the critic an apparent translucence.

For an empiricism of contextual particularity, the universal—de Man, for example, called “technically correct rhetorical readings . . . indeed universals, consistently defective models of language's impossibility to be a model language” (“Resistance” 19)—appears as having been always a veiled interest in power. Tendentially, every assertion of the transcendence of identity is now the assertion of a given (ideological) identity—a case of the nonconceptual and ubiquitous reality of (the will to) power. And this demystifying move indeed contains a necessary moment of critical reflection. Behind the rational mask of structuralism and deconstruction, for example, the empirical reality of the politics of power

can now be discerned in their adherents' relative indifference to that reality ("referential effects"), as the arrogance and political indifference of some Yale-School deconstructionists and the fascist past of de Man seemed (for many scholars and in *ad hominem* terms) to confirm. But even as the unmasking of false universalisms has a legitimate power to demystify, the anti-rationalism of contextualist historicism renders impossible the appeals to universalism that are necessary to its own emancipatory thrust, a contradiction that will give rise to such attempted corrections as Ernesto Laclau's *Emancipation(s)* or Alain Badiou's *Saint Paul: or the Foundation of Universalism*.

Furthermore, although the historical description of knowledge-power relations, pursued on the basis of the authoritative work of Michel Foucault and others, hardly bears the look of English romantic nature poetry or French symbolist lyric, and although most of us think of symbolic modes as being opposed to realist (and therefore also historicist) modes because—following M.H. Abrams, for example—we construe the former as imaginative-expressive and the latter as mimetic, New Historicism shares with symbolic literary modes an ideological commitment to the priority of (opaque or translucent) concretion over (transparent) abstraction. Thus, this return to history ultimately revives the symbolist aesthetic in the displaced form of its realist metonym, for the cultural-historical turn initiated by New Historicism is in fact committed to the symbolic presentational mode articulated from Romanticism on.<sup>13</sup>

Despite—but also due to—the fact that it proposes a “practice rather than a doctrine” (1), Stephen Greenblatt’s “Towards a Poetics of Culture” (Veeseer 1–14) functioned in the late 1980s as a key programmatic text for the New Historicism. Greenblatt begins by positioning himself against both Marxism and poststructuralism (in their pure forms and represented in the essay by Jameson and Lyotard, respectively) as against two forms of allegorism. Greenblatt thus suggests that a passage he has quoted from *The Political Unconscious*—the particular passage is not crucial here—has “the resonance of an allegory of the fall of man,” an allegory that “by the close [of the book] has been eschatologically reoriented so that the totality lies not in a past revealed to have always already fallen but in the classless future. A philosophical claim then appeals to an absent empirical event” (3).<sup>14</sup> Greenblatt goes on to argue that poststructuralism makes the opposite mistake: holding capitalism responsible for the effacement of real differences (between private and public, for instance) rather than the positing of ideological ones. However, these opposites share a common flaw: “History functions in both cases as a convenient anecdotal ornament upon a theoretical structure, and capitalism appears not as a complex social and economic development in the West but as a malign philosophical principle” (Greenblatt 5).

<sup>13</sup> For the programmatic return to history in Romanticism studies, see McGann. His polemic against Coleridge’s “allegorical visions” tellingly echoes what is often considered the Romantic symbolist ideology, but here in the name of “exploring politics, society, or the apparatuses and ideologies of the state” (McGann 97). Cf. Kenneth R. Johnston et al.

<sup>14</sup> Greenblatt’s claim that Jameson’s (structuralist) Marxism is allegorical is certainly not implausible. Jameson considers all interpretation to be “an essentially allegorical act” (10), and he further sees Marxism as unifying past events into “a single great collective story. . . sharing a single fundamental theme. . . the collective struggle to wrest a realm of Freedom from a realm of Necessity. . . vital episodes in a single vast unfinished plot” (19–20).

In place of these symmetrical allegories, Greenblatt argues that the separation and the unification of aesthetics and politics, of private and public, of nature and culture constitutes “a dizzying, seemingly inexhaustible circulation” between identity and difference, monological unity and disjointed multiplicity that “only capitalism has managed to generate” (8). And because Greenblatt claims to depend for this insight “less upon poststructuralist theory than upon the circulatory rhythms of American politics” (8), the claim to a foundation is empiricist and historicist, a realism of some sort (see White, in Veerer 297; and Said 223). This circulation or “oscillation between totalization and difference” is furthermore “built into the poetics of everyday behavior in America” (8). The oscillation in Greenblatt’s discourse between “poetics” and “politics”—which is consciously motivated and legitimated by his own argumentation about precisely that oscillation—is here situated, contextualized as it were, not by poststructuralist theory but by an “America” that functions as the real object that is the observable foundation of Greenblatt’s knowledge, even if empiricist “perception” has here been replaced by an interpretive reading shot through with theoretical reflections. (Indeed, if the basis of the insight were not some kind of reality, rather than a theory, there would be no way for Greenblatt to distinguish New Historicism from the poststructuralism that makes up a crucial part of its theoretical armamentarium.) But what sort of concept or phenomenon is this “circulation” or “oscillation” that Greenblatt finds in America?

Greenblatt goes on to provide two dazzling examples of what he means, examples I will only mention here on the way to discussing what they exemplify. First, he describes the interpenetration of both the establishment and undermining of the distinction between nature and culture in Yosemite Park, which Greenblatt calls “an exemplary fable of capitalist aesthetics that, however, fails to portray the dimension of ‘property relations’” (10). Second, in order to include this dimension, he describes the interpenetration of social and aesthetic discourses—or art and history, text and event—in Norman Mailer’s *Executioner’s Song* and *In the Belly of the Beast*, along with the economic conditions and the bizarre and unsettling events these texts incorporated and occasioned. These two examples, however, give rise—not by chance, in my view, and not merely by way of modesty or provisionality—only to a tantalizing promise of a not-yet-delivered abstraction that would be adequate to them: “We need to develop terms to describe the ways in which material . . . is transferred from one discursive sphere to another and becomes aesthetic property” (11). Like a *symbol*, then, Greenblatt’s own exemplary and evocative instances explicitly lack any adequate theoretical generalization. Precisely in this consists their distance from Marxist and poststructuralist modes of representation. Greenblatt’s examples evoke concretely an absent abstract concept, reversing the allegorical representational modality through which (according to Greenblatt) Jameson and Lyotard made philosophical claims appealing to an “absent empirical event” in place of which they used “history” only ornamentally.

Greenblatt closes by emphasizing that art is the “product of a negotiation between a creator or class of creators . . . and the institutions and practices of society” (8), a negotiation that depends on the creation of a “currency that is valid for a meaningful, mutually profitable exchange” (8). And he clarifies that he is not only alluding to money but—more importantly—“using the term ‘currency’

metaphorically to designate the systematic adjustments, symbolizations, and lines of credit necessary to enable an exchange to take place" (13). He thus makes the interpenetration of (the) identity and difference (of private and public) totalizable not merely in the phenomenal object (America, or was it capitalism?), but in the object specifically as "the hidden places of negotiation and exchange" (13). The object becomes a place of exchange, but exchange as a real object, as New Historicism's "history." Further, not only is "currency" being used "metaphorically," but "currency" is here also the (catachrestic) metaphor for metaphor—transfer and exchange—where metaphor *is* (historical) reality. This means that Greenblatt is establishing in the figure of "currency" a metaphorical crossing between metaphor (as discourse) and reality (as society), and a metaphorical crossing that is, as it were, more real than the real, and is (at least for the time being, as he has told us) beyond any possible abstract theorization. For all currency exists as the process of circulation.

History thus accumulates or exudes a symbolic nimbus because it consists in the negotiation of currency—that is, in the constant derivation of an unstable abstract medium of exchange from the radically particular positions and entities to be exchanged. And finally, in the connotation of the word "currency" as "presence," Greenblatt evokes the presence, as fleeting as it is enduring or eternal, that has been part of the ideology of the symbol since Romanticism at least. "Towards a Poetics of Culture" is one case, then, in which—in an inaugural text—the symbolic mode appears in New Historicism as the metaphorical resonance between metaphor and reality, a resonance (or circulation or oscillation) that is the reality of reality. Hence, perhaps, the surreal or uncanny thrill generated by examples such as the ones Greenblatt works out here, examples of a "dizzying, seemingly inexhaustible" (8) and "unsettling circulation" (13) that has nothing to do with "a stable, mimetic theory of art"—precisely because it is a symbolist theory of history.<sup>15</sup>

Finally, as the New Historicism and Cultural Studies are empiricist in their philosophical-methodological aspect and symbolist in their literary mode, so they appear—like all modern empiricisms and symbolisms—as *hysterical* when considered in psychoanalytic terms. From the mid-1980s on, the new-historical somatizing focus on material physical contexts, institutions, and events displaces the eroticization of thought characteristic of structuralist theoreticism. The "dialect of hysteria," as that which in Freud's system characterizes obsession, is now replaced by the language of hysteria itself: criticism becomes somatic, strategy becomes tactics, texts are embodied as institutions and Foucauldian discourses. The body, rather than theory of the text per se, becomes both a prominent object of inquiry and a constant presupposition in scholarly writing itself.<sup>16</sup> More or less suddenly, one thinks of oneself as a writing, thinking body in a material history—a history of bodies—and one thinks of the referents, signifieds, and signifiers of

<sup>15</sup> One can likewise identify an unintentionally symbolist strategy in Montrose (Veeser 23): "The Historicity of Texts and the Textuality of History": If such chiasmic formulations are in fashion now . . . it may be because they figure forth . . . the model of a dynamic, unstable, and reciprocal relationship between the discursive and material domains."

<sup>16</sup> For example, in "Cultural Studies and the Culture of Everyday Life," John Fiske summarizes the Foucauldian position he invokes (alongside Bourdieu, de Certeau, and others) in a section of his argument entitled "The Body of Difference" as follows: "the mechanisms which organize us into the disciplined subjects required by capitalism work ultimately through the body. . . . The social order. . . depends upon the control of people's bodies and behaviors" (Grossberg 162).



one's work as bodies, materialities, and so on. The distance as well as the proximity between (post)structuralist theoreticism and New Historicism and Cultural Studies consists in the reversal of the former's focus on the *body of language* (as signifier or rhetorical letter) into the latter's concern with the *language of bodies* themselves, both human and institutional.<sup>17</sup> Signifiers become less interesting than real bodies and the real social-discursive mechanisms that constitute and constrain them. In Lacanian terms, as the psychoanalyst Lucie Cantin puts it in "The Fate of Jouissance in the Pervert-Hysteric Couple," "Incapable of trusting the signifier, the hysteric lays in wait for the letter of the body where the word of the other is based and verified, the letter of the body being *that without which the signifier remains unbelievable*" (in Apollon et al. 169). Empirically given contexts and the material metaphors of power (as a kind of social *jouissance*) become the bodily site of interest for historicist Cultural Studies.

This turn from mind to body is accompanied by a more or less thoroughgoing and programmatic politicization of readings and a questioning of the surreptitious interests of aesthetic and theoretical texts in power and ideology. The effect—in contrast to the sometimes scientific and affirmative cultures of structuralism and New Criticism, respectively—is a sustained aggressivity toward the traditional canon and, more specifically, the phallic-patriarchal, bourgeois institutions of modern high culture. The turn away from "high theory" is thus accompanied by a shift of emphasis away from philosophical authorities increasingly held in suspicion for belonging to a Eurocentric, white male dominated canon. Freud's case-studies of Dora and the Ratman, as complex and problematic as they are, provide a starting point for a psychoanalytic reading of this shift by arguing that hysteria represses *love* (or eros, a principle of metaphorical unification), while obsession represses *hatred* (or thanatos, a principle of the maintenance of metonymic differences). (In each case, the repressed returns: in hysteria as somatic metaphors, in obsession as metonymies that induce delay and displacement of affect.) In accordance with this division, Cultural Studies and New Criticism/ (post)structuralism appear to realize symmetrically opposed modalities of repression, the former addressing accusations to the aesthetic and textual phenomena it also invests with the passion of its professional life-commitment, the latter idealizing (despite "critique" and perhaps even "deconstruction") a phallogocentric instance of oppression it necessarily also resents.

The manifest desiring positions entailed by these opposed modalities can be better understood through the slightly displaced terms offered by the psychoanalyst Joël Dor: "obsessionals are nostalgic for the state of *being* [metaphorically] the phallus, and . . . hysterics are militantly engaged in the cause of *having* it [metonymically]" (Dor 74). Although the manifestations of each position are different according to gender, "the same fantasy underlies [the hysteric's] quest . . . the subject has been unjustly deprived of the phallic attribution and must reappropriate it" (74). According to this formulation, the uncertain desire to identify with the tradition of the logos (or with language as such) characteristic of (post)structuralist rationalism would have its psychoanalytic flip side in the theoretical antitheoreticism of

<sup>17</sup> Cf. MacCannell 199: "For post-Freudian psychoanalysis and for its rebellious feminist daughters, the hysteric's silent speech—her body's language—is a crucial alternative to 'virile discourse' and constitutes a primary challenge to 'male' domination of discursive forms."

empiricist Cultural Studies, which *reappropriates the signifier* on behalf of a critique of the signifier in the name of the body of contextual particularity.

Of course, to *be* something, one must also *have* or possess oneself as this thing, and so have oneself outside oneself, thereby coming *not to be* what one also is. Conversely, to *have* something is to *identify* with what one has (as the property or proper of oneself), thus coming to be it and *no longer to have* it. Obsession and hysteria therefore interpenetrate and disrupt each other by the very definition Dor offers to hold them apart. This does not, however, mean that hysterical and obsessional formations of desire cannot exist. Rather, it indicates an antagonistic interlacing that seems to predict the fraught entanglement of (post)structuralism with New Historicist Cultural Studies (see Moore-Gilbert).

Furthermore, the position of Cultural Studies becomes both more and less meaningful, appears as *both* more *justified* by history and *relativized* by the trans-historical dimension (of the failure of the signifier), when we consider more particularly where, in terms of a clinical account, hysterical discourse originates. For the distrust of the signifier, a distrust based on what we can call a true knowledge of the traumatizing failure of the signifier adequately to represent the real or to motivate its conventional arrangements, is arguably responsive in the Cultural Studies generation of criticism to the same concerns as the hysteric, but on a collective level:

the hysterical subject struggles with maternal demand . . . the hysteric [male or female] is confronted with what has been interpreted as a maternal dissatisfaction and complaint, which have not been referred to *lack*, to the inevitable castration that the mother experiences like any human being, but which instead refer to the failure and insufficiency of the paternal phallus. . . . the mother's complaint . . . bears on her unsatisfied demand for a signifier of the father's love that would put an end to the jouissance (death drive) at work in her. Thus, the hysteric is in turn addressed and mobilized by the mother's unsatisfied demand to which the subject tries to respond. (Lucie Cantin in Apollon, Bergeron, and Cantin 162–63)

The contestation of high culture and autonomous or apolitical aesthetics in Cultural Studies can of course be said to be consistent with such a description without thereby suggesting that Cultural Studies is mere pathology, especially since in my own account there is no critical movement that is entirely resistant to translation into the language of particular psychoanalytic subjective structures. It seems plausible to suggest, for example, that men and women raised in long-term masculinist societies—and specifically during the postwar period when women had been pushed back into the home and out of the workforce in which they had actively participated during World War II—were in general confronted by a wave of maternal dissatisfaction that had real and historical causes in the social-sexual injustices these mothers suffered. In addition, the failure of (the signifiers of) white male heterosexist discourse to accommodate the claims for justice that emerged in the Civil Rights movement and feminism corresponds in sociohistorical terms exactly to such dissatisfaction. To this degree the analogy between Cultural Studies and hysteria is supported in a manner that by no means delegitimizes the work Cultural Studies produces explicitly and implicitly in the name of these historical experiences, which come to a head in the resurgence of politicized religion since the 1980s.

The association with hysteria perhaps offers a delimiting and limiting perspective on Cultural Studies in turn, however, where the psychoanalytic theorization reveals what may be an important unthought or unconscious aspect of emancipa-

tory, empiricist, and symbolist historicisms: namely, that contestation involves an attempted recuperation of that which is contested, a recuperation that subserves an evasion of a *non-historicizable* dimension of lack. Wherever the contestation of disempowerment is driven by a fantasy of absolute empowerment or pure spontaneity, for example as the attainment of a sovereign personal identity, a legitimate demand for infinite justice is replaced by an illegitimate (because self-deceiving) demand for infinite freedom, for example, freedom from the limitations of representation (since representation always entails the disruption of any unmediated dwelling in the Real of presence; this is the only meaning of “castration”). The tendency of emancipatory historicisms to recuperate sovereignty can, moreover, open Cultural Studies to the temptation to welcome its replacement by a figure of the perverse Master, a temptation I will consider further in my discussion of New Vitalism below:

the hysteric's 'response' can [sometimes] be an effort to consolidate the father, a quest for the phallic ideal of the Master, whose double purpose is to satisfy the mother while repairing the inadequacy of the father . . . . Such is obviously the role taken by the pervers . . . efforts to consolidate [the father] serve to repress and hide the fact that the problem is not due to the failure of any particular father, but rather to the inadequacy and the defect of the signifier itself regarding the work of the death drive . . . . Whether it involves an Other to be *seduced* who will allow the hysteric to constitute him- or herself as the object of the Other's desire and love, or an Other to accuse when the aim is to repress the lack of the Other as the subject's own, the 'presence' of a responsible Other is the . . . mode under which the hysteric avoids and represses castration. (Cantin in Apollon, Bergeron, and Cantin 163)

The attempt by empiricist historicism to make the concrete particularity of the case suffice in the relative absence of any theoretical signifier is not, then, just a way of doing without the signifier (or undoing it), or a way of completing the mourning over its loss, but a way of strengthening the signifier of theory in the name of (or as) history. It is a way of seducing/accusing theory with the body of history and overcoming their difference by way of denegation. To the degree that this occurs, (perversely) polemical mastery—the envy of (obsessional) rationalism—will tend, mediated by the appeal to the Real they share, to supplement (hysterical) empiricism.

### **Neo-idealism, Polemical Faith, Perversion: New Vitalisms and the End of Mourning**

Here, things become newly difficult, interesting, and dangerous: an exacerbated impatience with mediation emerges at the far side of the repetition of modern methods (of mourning) that split the “organic work” into its structural preconditions (the structuralist-poststructuralist moment) and its real contexts (the New-Historicist-Cultural Studies phase). As we have seen, in both theoreticism and historicism knowledge remains marked by a certain lack, mediated by the absence or distance of its own necessary complement across the gap between literal knowledge and what would fulfill it. Theoreticism remains in deficit of reference, historicism in deficit of meaning. The temptation that arises at the far side of the Cultural Studies phase is the notion of a possible return to the immediacy of a Real or Being that would escape the logic of the case, whether as mere illustration or as exemplary particularity. Although this temptation is already present (implicitly) in both structuralism and New Historicism (and especially

in the latter due to its cultivation of concreteness), it becomes explicit following the (incipient or at least inevitable) exhaustion of Cultural Studies and within the context of a renewed vitalist irrationalism whose distinct forms I can only indicate briefly here.<sup>18</sup>

First, in the popular sphere—in political and mediatic discourses as well as in religious and civic organizations—the resurgence of religion (as Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, and Buddhist fundamentalisms and violent nationalisms in particular) asserts globally that the modern secularist paradigm is at an end, that reason has to be founded on revelation and the political and public spheres founded on the (henceforth no longer) private sphere of faith (Juergensmeyer). The rift between the concrete particularity of reality and the abstract universality of the ideal would thus be overcome by a new totalizing absolute. Life would be lived without the presence of death interrupting it as difference, limitation, and lack at every point.

Second, and as if in an echo of this resurgence, academic discourses have begun to reassert neo-absolutist (as opposed to liberal, tendentially relativist, or nihilistic) models of a universal identity ostensibly beyond all particularisms. This reassertion is most powerfully represented by the recent returns to Paul in Slavoj Žižek, Giorgio Agamben, and Alain Badiou (I will discuss in detail only Žižek for the sake of space). Although these thinkers differ from one another (see Johnston; Žižek, *Puppet* 107ff; Vogt, “Exception,” esp. 72–74; and Dean 161 passim), each also seems at odds with himself to the degree that, in the name of a renewal of universalism (as against the particularism of new historicist Cultural Studies), each asserts the particularity of Christian religious culture, rhetoric, and philosophy as either the exemplary universality or as the one exception to the law that the particular is opposed to the universal. They assert the universality of this particularism against Judaism from a Christian (Pauline) point of view and so conjure an atmosphere that resembles, loosely speaking, a medieval *disputatio* (by arguing for a universal dogma or system) or, more rigorously, neo-absolutism (in that they oppose “Balkanized” identity politics—which corresponds in this analogy to the Thirty Years War—by positing a political metaphysics of life, a kind of vision of the state(less) church, for example in Žižek as Marxist Lacanianism qua realization of Christian salvation). In this respect, they represent a fusion of the particularism of the historicist moment (stressing Christian identity) with the universalism of the structuralist moment, a fusion that is, to my mind, deeply problematic.

These models replace the logic of the example with that of the exception, which they adapt to their own purposes from the discourse of Carl Schmitt. The case—always split between itself and the law of which it is the case, even when that law is the absence of any law but power—is now to be grounded in a fullness that exceeds that law and makes it possible: the exception itself.

In psychoanalytic terms, insofar as the recently replayed methods of modernity—obsessional (post)structuralism as an allegorical rationalism and hysterical New Historicism/Cultural Studies as a symbolist-realist empiricism—acknowledge the

<sup>18</sup> On vitalism, see Benjamin, especially 202–08. See also Badiou’s “Adventure,” which argues that twentieth-century French philosophy develops out of the philosophy of life (inaugurally represented by Henri Bergson) and the philosophy of the concept (epitomized by Léon Brunschvicg). Badiou claims further that post-World War II French philosophy attempts above all to overcome this separation of concept and existence.

law of (and as) lack and limitation, such methods can be appropriately characterized as *neurotic* in structure. In contrast, the resurgence of anti-modern positions is (in Žižek's case, explicitly) *perverse*—with perversion combined with the revolutionary moralism that often excludes it—insofar as it constitutes itself around the disavowal of lack, of the “castration” that is the death of God and the loss of the immediacy and fullness of presence that God was to have made possible. We no longer have to do with repression of life or death, love or aggression, because death and aggression can now be affirmed immediately—sublated—*as* life and love.

This disavowal of lack (which corresponds to *repression* in neurosis and *foreclosure* in psychosis) takes place as the disavowal of the gap between the figural and the literal (rhetorically speaking) or between possibility and reality (modally speaking)—no matter which way the two binary oppositions are constellated. For (rationalist) structuralism and (empiricist) historicism there remained, as I have indicated, a gap between the two dimensions, whether as the law of the non-universalizability of the particular (in historicism) or as the nonpresentability of pure differential meaning (in structuralism). The New Vitalist projects for a return to immediacy seem to suggest to the contrary that, in some future time whose arrival we can facilitate by appropriate action, this gap will no longer interrupt the continuity of being.

It is not surprising, then, that this New Vitalism announces itself in a series of emphatic readings of Paul. For not only does Paul represent the paradigmatic Christian and anti-Jewish position that stresses the distance between law and faith, but Paul, more than any other, also sets up the relation between Judaism and Christianity as one in which the *figural* anticipation (or dead letter of law) is replaced by the *literal* realization (as pure spirit of faith). That is, the very gesture by which the New Vitalist readings of Paul propose a Christian thought in the place of a Jewish one implies *the passage from figural to literal* that it has been the burden of modern philosophical method to articulate as mediated in epistemological terms. Identification with the dying God (rather than a completed mourning for him/her/it) becomes, tellingly, a replacement for epistemological method in the New Vitalism that is opposed—in Agamben as in Žižek, and perhaps also in Badiou—to the supposedly dead thought of the supposedly dead letter.

Finally, with regard to “poetic” or representational modes, the gap between literal and figural is also the rift between allegorical sense and allegorical image, or between symbolic condensation and its (never appearing) abstract signification. In the New Vitalisms, however, the law of this difference or gap is replaced by a faith in its eventual disappearance (or sublation, for example in Žižek as the overcoming of the obscene superego that haunts the law). Literature (as allegory or symbol), and indeed representation more generally, is to be replaced by a *polemic* that understands itself as an enactment of *faith*.

The work of Giorgio Agamben provides, despite certain appearances, an example of the re-emergence of this temptation of immediacy, both in Agamben's amalgamation of Heideggerian and Christian motifs and in his nostalgic fascination (even if under the sign of negation) with Carl Schmitt's thought on the exception. As I have argued in “From the Sacrifice of the Letter to the Voice of Testimony,” Agamben's continuing polemic against Derridian thought aspires to return to what he takes to be the original event of language itself as Being qua Logos. In the work on *homo sacer*, he ultimately caricatures and scapegoats the

juridical sphere for the loss of this “event,” a gesture that finds support in his readings of Paul, and he ultimately fails to understand the sacrificial dimension of National Socialist anti-Semitism because he is blind to the role that Pauline antinomianism (a tradition he prolongs) plays in the constitution of that anti-Semitism, despite the Nazis’ hostility to (non-Aryan) Christianity. (This does not mean that Agamben is either a fascist or an anti-Semite; however, a philosophical anti-Judaism runs deep in his thinking.) His desire for a world in which the law of mediation (or representation) is not in force orients itself in terms of what is ultimately a vision of pure immediacy, the metaphysical illusion par excellence. Although the state of the very force of law itself is one in which particular and universal become indistinct because law effaces particularity, the suspension of the law envisioned eschatologically by Agamben as the overcoming of this state of exception that has become the rule is itself a situation in which the particular would efface all generality, as if Being would present itself without any form of representation (or, as one could put it in the Schopenhauerian terms Heidegger displaces, a realm of pure, self-suspending will): “This biopolitical body that is bare life must itself . . . be transformed into the site for the constitution and installation of a form of life that is wholly exhausted in bare life and a *bios* that is only its own *zoē* . . . as essence, in the Heideggerian definition of *Dasein*, lies (*liegt*) in its existence” (188).

Despite his differences of opinion with Agamben, Slavoj Žižek’s recent recuperation of Christianity as an explicitly “perverse” foundation of political activism presses in a similar direction.<sup>19</sup> Because he embraces the traditional Christian characterization of Judaism as the religion of the law (as opposed to Christian faith) and the dead letter that anticipates the living spirit of Christ’s grace, the recognition of some limitation of presence and some necessity of radical lack (the ultimate implication of law itself present in both structuralism and New Historicism) looks to him like the methods of Judaic “liberalism.” The path beyond these methods (as the direction of the *Aufhebung* of the particular and the general) hence appears to him necessarily as a Christian path supported by the appeal to Paul.<sup>20</sup>

In *On Belief*, for example, Žižek concludes with the emphatic insistence that we pass beyond “the domain of ethical norms” to “Faith” in the tradition of Christi-

<sup>19</sup> The shifting and inconsistent role of “disavowal” in Žižek’s recent works complicates and renders problematic his position. See, for example, *On Belief*, 130, 132, 137, and *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, 112, 113, 118.

<sup>20</sup> This move is attractive to (post)structuralists and Cultural Studies scholars alike, in that, as Joël Dor puts it, “the obsessional tries desperately—albeit unconsciously—to become a pervert, but always fails in the attempt” (46), while, as Lucie Cantin reminds us, “the pervert who offers to be the Master takes the place of this Other . . . . The pervert takes on responsibility for the jouissance at work in the hysteric . . . by promising a total satisfaction and the occlusion of any encounter with lack” (*After Lacan* 163). Of course, whether or not Žižek himself “is” a neurotic or a pervert is at once indeterminable and irrelevant. The point is that he proposes a perverse solution in his pro-Christian writings. On the other hand, in certain other writings, such as the chapter entitled “Passionate (Dis)Attachments, or Judith Butler as a Reader of Freud” (in *The Ticklish Subject* 291–373), he argues precisely *against* the confusion of perversion (which he reads here as the spirit of subversion) with a properly radical left position identified with hysteria. However, since the hysterical-pervert couple forms a single structure in which one complements the other or answers to the other’s demand, the inconsistent oscillation between these two positions—the privileging of hysteria or perversion—is predictable. What is crucial is the problematic identification of a particular subjective structure with a desirable political stance.

anity, which he sees as having been “from its inception THE religion of modernity” (150) since it sees in God (with whom qua Christ we are to identify) “the purely negative gesture of meaningless sacrifice, of giving up what matters most to us” (150). Approaching this “meaningless sacrifice” (which implicitly recalls Bataille’s *dépense*) explicitly in terms of the Kierkegaardian passage beyond the ethical to the religious dimension, Žižek goes on to say that it is the “*sine qua non* of an authentic unconditional ethical engagement” (151). Among other difficulties, Žižek naïvely and willfully ignores here (even if he addresses them elsewhere) critiques of the jargon of “authenticity” that have been articulated in different terms by Adorno, Derrida, and de Man, among others. The “miracle of faith” that enables this “authentic unconditional ethical engagement” is (absolutely) valuable because it enables us to pass beyond the (here explicitly Derridian) “passive decision” that Žižek has equated with the Lacanian “fundamental fantasy” (147–48). (Such is the fascinating but problematically overdetermined character of his discourse that Derridian “passive decision” becomes Lacanian “fundamental fantasy” without further ado.)

This movement of faith is also that of “properly Christian love . . . a Love beyond Mercy” that “is always love for the Other insofar as he is lacking—we love the Other BECAUSE of his limitation, helplessness, ordinariness even,” and that is contrasted to the “pagan celebration of the (Divine) or human Perfection” (147). This contrast between Christian and pagan love—which itself, through the rhetoric of love of the Other for the sake of his limitation, functions as a seduction of the Cultural Studies liberal moralism Žižek elsewhere disdains—comes shortly after Žižek has argued that the Jews are the true pagans: “In contrast to the pagans, it was the Jews themselves who believed/assumed that the (sensual/material) image of the divine Person would show too much” (132). “The” Jews (and “the” pagans)—both of which large formations Žižek characterizes here, as he does “the Christians,” always in ahistorical generalizations—evidently do not possess the “properly Christian” notion of love of the Other “insofar as he is lacking.” Further, although Žižek does note a number of connections between the Jewish and Christian positions along the way,<sup>21</sup> Christianity appears repeatedly in the most traditional Pauline supercessionist, typological terms as what “goes to the end” (131), that is, *realizes* or *fulfills* the Jewish *prefiguration*, the latter being, as in Paul, always the dead letter of the law. For example, Jews “effectively do not live in what communitarians today refer to as ‘life-world’” (128), a world which, one might add, Wagner and his followers simply referred to as “nature,” “the earth,” and so on. Jews are thus artificial and lack interiority; hence they lack also the freedom *actively* to decide. “The Christian answer [to Judaism, or to what Žižek calls the “Judeo-Lacanian” (137) position] is that, precisely, *the tension between the pacifying Law and the excessive superego is not the ultimate horizon of our experience*: it is possible to step out of this domain, not into the fake imaginary bliss, but into the Real of an act” (137).

<sup>21</sup> Here is an example of this “liberal” type of gesture, which is clearly at odds with the more definitive typological schematization of the relationship between Judaism and Christianity that otherwise governs his thought: “in its ‘normal’ functioning, the Law generates as the ‘collateral damage’ of its imposition its own transgression/excess (the vicious cycle of Law and sin described in an unsurpassable way in Corinthians), while in Judaism and Christianity, it is directly this excess itself which addresses us” (*The Puppet and the Dwarf* 113).

Needless to say, everyone wants to step into “the Real of an act” (even if horror may be involved in its contemplation).<sup>22</sup> However, two qualifications of this promise are necessary. On the one hand, this promise, which Žižek extends here (prophet-like) in the name of a Christianity (as realization of Judaism) that is to provide the proper ontological and psychic orientation for a Marxist revolutionism, amounts to the Counter-Enlightenment promise of an escape from representation and mediation into a pure immediacy whose irrationalist metaphysics and problematic political past are both (separately and together) worthy of suspicion. And on the other, one cannot assume that a world marked by representation and mediation—the world Žižek caricatures sweepingly as the realm of the liberal norm (very much in the tradition of the reactionary [anti]modernism of a Schmitt or Heidegger)—is entirely devoid of any dimension of action. In other words, the crude binary opposition between a bad contemporary “liberal” reality that amounts to passivity and unfreedom and a good revolutionary moment of activity and freedom is illusory.<sup>23</sup>

Further, to associate liberal modernity with Judaism, as Žižek does in this and recent texts, is to repeat the move made by reactionary Counter-Enlightenment anti-Judaic Christians (Aryanist or otherwise) from F.H. Jacobi through Wagner and up to Veit Harlan’s 1940 film *Jud Süß*. In such discourses, the Jews are scapegoated for the liberal modernity that, with the separation of church and state, enables them to enter European society for the first time. To return to the anti-Semitic dimensions of Marxism since “On the Jewish Question”—or for that matter to return to that text’s crudely overstated project of effacing all division between public and private, state and religion—strikes me as the wrong way to go about “re-enlivening” the left. Finitude need not be “sacrificed” (see, also, Badiou 142–43) in order to develop a significant or workable politics of the left.

Moreover, it is embarrassingly and symptomatically irrelevant how many Jewish friends and intellectual supporters Žižek may have, as he protests in his response to Adam Kirsch’s polemical critique (a critique that is not entirely misguided even if it is philologically and philosophically limited).<sup>24</sup> Indeed, it is all the more irrelevant since Žižek is right when he argues in other contexts that fantasy is impervious to empirical reality (here the empirical reality of the Jews who are some of Žižek’s best friends). To live without limits and without death in the immediacy of the here and now (even if this vitalism is tweaked to include an excess beyond life that is proper to life)—to live “the Real of the act”—is evidently such an attractive possibility that even the most intelligent, learned, witty,

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<sup>22</sup> For useful examinations of Žižek’s appropriation of the Lacanian “act,” see the essays by Devenney and Marchart in Bowman and Stamp 45–60 and 99–116, respectively.

<sup>23</sup> Berlant develops in “Slow Death” an important alternative in her notion of a “practical sovereignty” that “would be better understood not to take the mimetic or referred shape of state or individual sovereignty but a shape made by mediating conditions of zoning, labor, consumption, and governmentality, as well as unconscious and explicit desires not to be an inflated ego deploying and manifesting power” (757).

<sup>24</sup> The exchange with Adam Kirsch occurred in the *New Republic*, 3 Dec. 2008 and 7 Jan. 2009. In “Exception in Žižek’s Thought” Eric Vogt offers in a footnote a “self-criticism” of his (outstanding) earlier critique of Žižek (“Schmittian Traces in Žižek’s Political Theology [and Some Derridian Specters]”), which he now finds too critical of what nonetheless “I still consider the somewhat-too-apologetic Christian account of Judaism and Christianity” (74 n. 9).



and experienced of us are capable of deluding ourselves under the influence of that attraction.<sup>25</sup>

Finally, the (unfinished) mourning for the death of God that constitutes modern method assumes in Žižek the form of an imitative internalization of Christ as the dying God, of Christ as the “exceptional” case whose death (with which we are to identify) is immediately a resurrection and who annihilates (or “suspends”) law by replacing it with the full presence of the absolute. But it remains difficult to see how such mourning could ever come to an end. It would simply have to perpetuate itself in the infinite repetition of its imitation of Christ (in “meaningless sacrifice”), even if this imitation is phrased as the “ultimate heroic gesture that awaits Christianity: in order to save its treasure, it has to sacrifice itself—like Christ, who had to die so that Christianity could emerge” (*Puppet* 171). Such an imitation—to save the “treasure” of *agalma* that Žižek otherwise urges us to renounce in order to access love—is hardly an escape from the universalization of a cultural particularism—this time, a Christian one—which Cultural Studies has been right to denounce in general.<sup>26</sup> And it is hardly a plausible program for a truly universalist politics.

Thus, notwithstanding the brilliance and importance of these examples of the thought of exception—and of course it would ideally be necessary to provide a much more detailed reading of these texts than I can provide here—the methodology on which they are based requires continued critical reappraisal with a view to the dangers of a return to the desire for, and claim to, a vital immediacy of experience—*Erlebnis*—not marked by radical lack. Neither Kantianism nor rationalism nor empiricism nor politicized religion (or religious politics), even if in the name of Marx qua Lacan or Heidegger; neither phobia nor obsession nor hysteria nor perversion; neither irony nor allegory nor symbol nor polemical faith; neither New Criticism nor structuralism nor New Historicism nor New Vitalism can overcome finitude. For each of these methodologies itself represents a finite position. There is nothing wrong with this failure to transcend the finite: each position remains flawed and partial, even when they are combined as in the account I have provided. We have not yet finished coming to terms with the loss of the absolute.

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<sup>25</sup> See *The Puppet and the Dwarf* 93–99: “The evocation of the Holocaust serves as a warning of what the ultimate result of the submission of Life to some higher Goal is” (99). This remark—in which Žižek objects to the liberal abuse of the Holocaust—indicates one reason why Žižek (along with Badiou) is tired of hearing about it. But the Holocaust obviously had everything to do with the submission of Life *not* to a higher goal but to the goal of *being pure Life* (the Nazi biological myth as a version of vitalistic [anti]modernism). If Žižek’s rhetoric urges us here to have the courage to live fully—“to be fully alive means to be larger than life” (98)—the Holocaust should indeed warn us against precisely this type of (macho) vitalism, even when the latter lays claim to revolutionary Marxism and denounces racism per se.

<sup>26</sup> Arguing that Christianity fulfills Jewish law, Žižek at one point states, “the problem with Judaism is not that it is ‘too legal’ but that it is not ‘legal’ enough” (*Puppet* 117). While this seems a clever reversal of the expected logic of Paulinism, it is not: to “realize” the law always meant exceeding the law by perfecting it. For Žižek, Judaism is too loving only in a narcissistic sense: “I continue to cling to the immediacy of love that feels threatened by the rule of Law” (117). In contrast, “Law loses its ‘alienated’ character of an external force . . . the moment the subject renounces its attachment to the pathological *agalma* deep within itself, the notion that there is deep within it some precious treasure that can only be loved” (117). When we get rid of this Jewish “pathological stain of love” (117), we will accede to Christian love, overcoming the difference between limitation and unlimitation.

Indeed, the returns of the lost absolute (or foundation or origin), which we have been tracing as repetitions of various responses to its loss, have no less strong a hold on us than the enduring traditions of the various *period discourses* (and the associated determinations of the subject) that these post-World War II trends in humanities methodology repeat in turn. If method as *epistemology* presupposes and attempts to determine in a reliable manner a conscious *subject of knowledge*, then it repeats the Enlightenment desire for universal rationality. Structuralism, with its epistemological obsession, is thus above all a neo-Enlightenment formation. At the other extreme, if method as determination of a *subjective and affective position* presupposes a subject of the unconscious, or an unconscious subject, as a *subject of desire* rather than of knowledge per se, then such a method—psychoanalysis in this case—is rooted in Romanticism (as has often been argued), because it tries to describe the irrational dimension of consciousness rather than to prescribe its rationality. And indeed, psychoanalysis arises in close proximity to *Lebensphilosophie* (a neo-Romantic formation if there ever was one), which it however criticizes, complicating the notion of Eros as life-drive by linking it inextricably with its inimical other, Thanatos as death-drive. (Žižek unwittingly—and despite the rationalist appearances generated by his reliance on the structuralist Lacanian Master-discourse—undoes this complication.)<sup>27</sup> In between these extremes, *historicism* develops its method with reference to a presupposed *subject of history* and/or history as subject, regardless of whether or not the status of history as “subject” is modified or otherwise disavowed, as in the nonetheless very rich Foucauldian tradition. This method, which in literary history we call *realism*, tries to link the rationality of the description of historical conditions with the acknowledged irrationality of human subjection to these conditions. And finally, if method as *formalism* presupposes a *subject of forms*, or forms as subject, as does the New Criticism (which here, evidently, overlaps with the structuralism that supercedes it in this country), then it remains rooted in, and closely akin to, the *aestheticism* of the late nineteenth century. Accordingly, the New Critics are often accused of perpetuating the doctrine of *l'art pour l'art*, and plausibly so to the degree that modernist poets such as Eliot were strongly influenced by a late nineteenth-century “symbolist” poetry “opposed” to “Romanticism” (see Abrams). In terms of these points of reference, then, the methods of the humanities since World War II recapitulate aestheticism, neoclassicism, realism, and neo-Romanticism in turn, with their foci on form, systematically ordered knowledge, history, and subjective life, as so many images or figures—phantoms—of the (lost) absolute value or foundation. The stages of a “given” historical trauma evidently do not repeat themselves without displacement, nor

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<sup>27</sup> While it arose amidst strong vitalist/idealist currents, psychoanalysis has resisted these tendencies in different ways, depending on the psychoanalytic subtradition. As I argue elsewhere (“Introduction”), Freud’s work emulates a *critical* epistemology; Lacan’s intervention inscribes itself in a *rationalist* (i.e. Cartesian) tradition; and ego-psychology and object-relations privilege *empiricist* discourse. (Thus, not only can psychoanalytic categories situate epistemological approaches, but epistemological categories can situate psychoanalytic paradigms: I grant psychoanalysis no absolute privilege here.) Freud’s metapsychological ironies, Lacan’s structuralist allegorism, Winnicott’s transitional symbolism, Žižek’s idealization of the material—all constitute legitimate but limited differentiations of the vitalist position. The specific limitation of Žižek’s idealism is that it unintentionally ties analysis to the milieu of life-philosophy in the late nineteenth century. In this sense, Žižek’s orthodox Lacanian stance is misleading.

necessarily in the order in which they occurred in an earlier iteration. It remains to be determined to what degree the historical trauma of the “death of God” has been worked through in the repetitions retraced here as the history of recent humanities method.

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