

modern european criticism and theory

A CRITICAL GUIDE

Edited by
JULIAN WOLFREYS

Modern European Criticism and Theory

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Modern British and Irish Criticism and Theory
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Modern European Criticism and Theory

A Critical Guide

Edited by Julian Wolfreys

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Contents

<i>Preface</i>	ix
1. René Descartes and Baruch Spinoza: Beginnings <i>Warren Montag</i>	1
2. Immanuel Kant and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel <i>Jacques Lezra</i>	7
3. Johann Christian Friedrich Hölderlin <i>Véronique M. Fóti</i>	27
4. Karl Marx <i>Robert C. Holub</i>	34
5. Charles Baudelaire and Stéphane Mallarmé <i>Elizabeth Constable</i>	41
6. Friedrich Nietzsche <i>Robert C. Holub</i>	50
7. Sigmund Freud <i>Juliet Flower MacCannell</i>	57
8. Ferdinand de Saussure and Structural Linguistics <i>Kenneth Womack</i>	68
9. Edmund Husserl <i>Claire Colebrook</i>	71
10. Phenomenology <i>Ulrich Michael Haase</i>	80
11. Gaston Bachelard and Georges Canguilhem: Epistemology in France <i>Alison Ross and Amir Ahmadi</i>	90
12. Jean Paulhan and/versus Francis Ponge <i>Jan Baetens</i>	98
13. György Lukács <i>Mitchell R. Lewis</i>	104
14. Russian Formalism, the Moscow Linguistics Circle, and Prague Structuralism: Boris Eichenbaum, Jan Mukarovsky, Victor Shklovsky, Yuri Tynyanov, Roman Jakobson <i>Kenneth Womack</i>	112
15. Ludwig Wittgenstein <i>William Flesch</i>	118

16. Martin Heidegger <i>Claire Colebrook</i>	125
17. Antonio Gramsci <i>Stephen Shapiro</i>	135
18. Walter Benjamin <i>Jeremy Tambling</i>	141
19. Reception Theory: Roman Ingarden, Hans-Georg Gadamer and the Geneva School <i>Luke Ferretter</i>	149
20. The Frankfurt School, the Marxist Tradition, Culture and Critical Thinking: Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, Theodor Adorno, Jürgen Habermas <i>Kenneth Surin</i>	156
21. Mikhail Bakhtin <i>R. Brandon Kershner</i>	166
22. Georges Bataille and Maurice Blanchot <i>Arkady Plotnitsky</i>	172
23. Bertolt Brecht <i>Loren Kruger</i>	186
24. Jacques Lacan <i>Juliet Flower MacCannell</i>	194
25. The Reception of Hegel and Heidegger in France: Alexandre Kojève, Jean Hyppolite, Maurice Merleau-Ponty <i>Jean-Michel Rabaté</i>	204
26. Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus and Existentialism <i>Mark Currie</i>	211
27. Emmanuel Levinas <i>Kevin Hart</i>	216
28. Simone de Beauvoir and French Feminism <i>Karen Green</i>	224
29. Claude Lévi-Strauss <i>Boris Wiseman</i>	233
30. Jean Genet <i>Alain-Michel Rocheleau</i>	239
31. Paul Ricoeur <i>Martin McQuillan</i>	246
32. Roland Barthes <i>Nick Mansfield</i>	255
33. French Structuralism: A. J. Greimas, Tzvetan Todorov and Gérard Genette <i>Dirk de Geest</i>	263
34. Louis Althusser and his Circle <i>Warren Montag</i>	271
35. Reception Theory and Reader-Response: Hans-Robert Jauss, Wolfgang Iser, and the School of Konstanz <i>Jeremy Lane</i>	278
36. Jean-François Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard: The Suspicion of Metanarratives <i>Garry Leonard</i>	285

37. The Social and the Cultural: Michel de Certeau, Pierre Bourdieu and Louis Marin <i>Brian Niro</i>	292
38. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari <i>Claire Colebrook</i>	301
39. Michel Foucault <i>John Brannigan</i>	310
40. Jacques Derrida <i>Kevin Hart</i>	315
41. Luce Irigaray <i>Ewa Ziarek</i>	324
42. Christian Metz <i>Marcia Butzel</i>	333
43. Guy Debord and the Situationist International <i>Lynn A. Higgins</i>	339
44. Umberto Eco <i>SunHee Kim Gertz</i>	347
45. Modernities: Paul Virilio, Gianni Vattimo, Giorgio Agamben <i>David Punter</i>	354
46. Hélène Cixous <i>Juliet Flower MacCannell</i>	363
47. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy <i>Heesok Chang</i>	369
48. Julia Kristeva <i>Joan Brandt</i>	380
49. Slavoj Žižek <i>Michael Walsh</i>	388
50. <i>Cahiers du Cinéma</i> <i>Maureen Turim</i>	396
51. Critical Fictions: Experiments in Writing from <i>Le Nouveau Roman</i> to the Oulipo <i>Jean Baetens</i>	402
52. <i>Tel Quel</i> <i>Jean-Michel Rabaté</i>	409
53. Other French Feminisms: Sarah Kofman, Monique Wittig, Michèle Le Doeuff <i>Nicole Fluhr</i>	417
54. Psychoanalytic Literary Criticism in France <i>Nicholas T. Rand</i>	424
<i>Contributors</i>	429
<i>Index</i>	431

Preface

Modern European Criticism and Theory offers the reader a comprehensive critical overview of the widespread and profound contest of ideas within European 'thought', focusing primarily on the major voices in poetics, philosophy, linguistics and psychoanalysis, as well as those in what have become in the twentieth century literary and cultural studies from the Enlightenment to the present day. Examining how conceptions of subjectivity, identity and gender have been interrogated, over fifty essays critically assess the ways in which we think, see and act in the world, as well as the ways in which we represent such thought psychologically, politically, and philosophically and culturally.

Focusing on a broad range of singular critical voices, and to a great degree attending to the major conceptual interrogations, reorientations and, subsequently, movements and transitions in thought that have taken place as a result of the irreversible effects occasioned by those particular voices, the present volume offers successive narratives of transformation and translation. Charting various radical interventions in thinking concerning fundamental philosophical, political and poetic issues related to matters of being, meaning and identity, the essays provide themselves an intervention in and a continuation of that radical tradition. The narrative that unfolds from the essays of this volume and their interwoven yet discontinuous threads amounts to the unravelling of a cultural, historical and epistemological tapestry by which the most fundamental matters of ontology and the poetics and politics of being have come to be perceived. Whether presenting itself in terms that are primarily linguistic, psychoanalytic, political or philosophical, the historical narrative of critical discourse in and across Europe and its subsequent translation into the practices and discourses of modern criticism and theory, so-called, reveals itself here as one of continuous upheavals, shifts and processes of decentring contest. What is at stake in such contest, tension and conflict are the very grounds of thinking about thinking, in historically and culturally grounded and material ways concerning how the human subject can speak of its specificity, its experience and its singular encounters with all that inform and articulate its subjectivity.

While foregrounding the practice and theory of literary and cultural criticism in many of its historically specific guises, the present volume also provides extensive critical coverage of the related contextual discourses that inform those issues, and out of which criticism has developed in the guises that it now assumes. What the reader will therefore come to understand is that criticism cannot be thought separately from the many forms and traditions of thought, whether scientific or poetic, political or rhetorical, semantic or epistemological, which have been sustained in so diverse and fruitful a fashion as this

collection suggests. The essays of this collection recognize the interanimation between discourses and cultures of thinking, and so explore matters of hybridity, translation and border crossings between discourses and cultures, between disciplines and forms of analysis and investigation. There is, in European thought, no one identity, no one articulation that seamlessly and homogeneously gathers together in undifferentiated form a discourse that could, itself, be described as European; and yet it is perhaps the very resistance to such ontological homogeneity and *in-difference* that is a strikingly 'European' feature of that which goes by the name of critical thinking, as these essays intimate.

Each of the essays thus chart and trace processes of translation and transformation, of hospitality to the other as well as attempted assimilations of that very alterity. In welcoming the other into one's home, across the threshold, boundary or border as a gesture of hospitality and welcome, there are also signs, if not of hostility, then of a hermeneutics of suspicion. Intrinsic to this welcome, inextricably tied up with any such act, is a desire to render the foreign, the other, that which is different, less strange or threatening perhaps. Hospitality assumes both tolerance and neutralization, and it seeks to maintain a degree of mastery through taking in just enough of the other into its system, immunizing itself if you will, in order to allow it to carry on with business as usual. What goes here by the name of 'European' thinking, or 'European' critical discourse, is shown by the critics who have contributed to this volume to be both negotiations of the very kind just outlined and yet, simultaneously, on the part of many of the critics, poets, writers and philosophers of whom they speak, a rigorous critique, and, occasionally, a 'deconstruction' of the very grounds on which the accommodation of difference and otherness takes place.

Such incorporations are not without consequences, without the rise of contest and conflict; and also, not inconsequent to the encounters are the misreadings and misperceptions, the avoidances, the non-reception, and even occasionally the hostilities that provide some of the more visible punctuations within the history of criticism and what we misname theory. The articles in the present volume chart and reflect on the accommodations and resistances, the tolerances and intolerances. In this, each article concerns itself not only with the formalist contours and epistemological parameters of a particular discourse, it also acknowledges the cultural, historical and ideological specificities of the emergence and transformation of criticism. The reader of this collection will not – *not necessarily* – learn how to read like, say, Paul Ricoeur or Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva or Michel Foucault (though each of the critics chosen to write about their subjects have been selected for their recognized ability to be faithful to the contours of the other's thought in its translation for the purposes of the present volume). The reader will, however, come to recognize *how* such thinkers have made it possible to open oneself to the most generous of accommodations while, at the same time, questioning what arrives so as to maintain its spirit, while effecting radical change.

Together and individually, the essays offer to the reader a view of the extent to which the discourses of philosophy, poetics, politics, aesthetics, linguistics and psychoanalysis have become part of the densely imbricated textures of critical practice. Furthermore, while remaining aware of the importance of the various contexts within and out of which criticism has grown, the essays herein also concern themselves with the equally important issue of cross-fertilization between the various academic and intellectual cultures under consideration. *Modern European Criticism and Theory* thus provides the reader with a comprehension of the key issues with the intention of demonstrating that those issues and the fields into which they are woven are marked by, even as they themselves re-mark, an

unending and vital process of hybridization – of methodologies, disciplines, discourses and interests. In this, when taken together the essays comprising the present volume can be seen to question implicitly the very condition of the practice and theory of criticism itself or indeed, any propadeutic separation of notions of theory and practice.

In presenting the various facets of critical activity, there have been omissions, doubtless. This is true of the shaping of any narrative. Even so, it is hoped that the overall contours of critical thinking and discourse in Europe are not misrepresented, and that, concomitantly, the dominant hegemonies and cultures of thought in their particular historical and cultural moments are neither distorted nor in some other manner misrepresented (beyond, that is, any inescapable and inevitable translation process). It has to be said that if there is no such thing as a pure discourse, self-sufficient and closed off from influences, confluences and even contaminations, there is also no such thing as a finite determination, context or group of contexts. One obviously cannot speak of either purely national, conceptual, or universal determinations; equally one cannot ascribe to critical thinking a finite or unchanging condition. The very definition of literary criticism implicit here is of an identity always in crisis, and always accommodated as such in its mutability. Intellectual cultures, like literary genres, have moments of historical ascendance, ideological transformation, and hegemonic dominance. Appearing to lose that dominance, going ‘out of fashion’ as is sometimes perceived in the more journalistic of interpretations, traces, influences, remain, continuing to be transformed, and so to effect the cultures of criticism in which the reader is presently situated. It is with such issues, such processes and cultures of transformation and translation that *Modern European Criticism and Theory* is purposely involved.

Julian Wolfreys

1. René Descartes (1596–1650) and Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677): Beginnings

In his 1949 essay, 'The Mirror Stage' (1966), Jacques Lacan, attempting to take his distance from existentialism, divided philosophy into two camps: those that took the *Cogito* as their starting point and those that did not (this statement was repeated many times after, including by some of France's most important thinkers, among them Foucault and Canguilhem). With such a statement, Lacan located the origins of French or even European philosophy not in Husserl, Hegel or even Kant, but in the conflictual field of seventeenth-century philosophy, specifically in the opposing doctrines of René Descartes and Baruch Spinoza. This may come as a surprise to the Anglo-American reader for whom the only conflict associated with the seventeenth-century is that between rationalism and empiricism and for whom Spinoza is a secondary or even tertiary figure, a minor Cartesian only recently admitted into the canon of philosophers deemed worthy of scholarly attention. Further, while Descartes's *Meditations* is well-known even outside the field of philosophy, his name is primarily associated with his proof of God's existence and, through Locke, the doctrine of innate ideas, neither of which are particularly relevant to the concerns of modern French philosophy and theory. How then are we to understand the sense in which the conflict between these two philosophers (assuming that their relation is one of conflict) constitutes a 'beginning'?

There is no question of identifying a French or even continental reading, or readings, of Descartes and Spinoza which would then become the correct interpretation in counter-position to the Anglo-American. Nor is it a question of simply multiplying readings as if, without any true relation to their object, they can never be any other than projections of the culture or historical moment in which they emerge. Instead, we will argue that specific historical moments impose on philosophical texts a historically determined (and therefore identifiable) grid that in turn determines what in a text is visible or invisible, what is compelling and what devoid of interest. There are thus no readings independent of texts and no texts independent of reading. Both the text and its history are equally real, equally material; both must be explained.

Let us begin with Descartes: what did twentieth-century French philosophy select from Descartes and what determined this selection? The fact that Lacan could use a declension of a Latin verb, *cogito* ('I think'), as a noun, suggests very clearly the importance of the first two *Meditations*. In a very important sense (and Lacan himself, among others, would later have occasion to comment on this), the first two sections of the *Meditations* were abstracted

from the text as a whole and even more importantly from the chain of arguments in which they were simply a preliminary step, the nature of which would be modified in the course of the demonstration. Indeed, the meticulous reconstruction of Descartes's 'order of reasons' by Martial Gu eroult in a famous commentary many times the length of the *Meditations* themselves, showed beyond any doubt the impressionistic sketchy quality of such readings. The fact remains, however, that the reduction of the *Meditations*, or even Cartesian philosophy as a whole, to 'the Cogito' was not simply 'false', that is without any relation to the text, and it remains to be seen to what extent such a reading was authorized by the *Meditations* themselves.

One might simply read the first paragraph of the *Meditations* to discover what made Descartes so controversial in his own time and so much a contemporary of the twentieth century: the ubiquity of the first person pronoun 'I'. A work devoted to the establishment of the 'first philosophy', that is to the construction of an adequate foundation for philosophical and scientific inquiry, would customarily have avoided reference to the individuality of the philosopher, his fears, hopes and feelings, for fear of being dismissed as outside the universal. Indeed, a tradition dating from Aristotle, and which includes medieval Christian, Jewish and Islamic philosophy, regarded rationality or truth as necessarily collective in nature, residing in the totality of an ever present archive of authoritative works. An individual, in order to escape the particularity of individual existence, had to accede to and participate in this archive to formulate universally valid propositions. Descartes shocked his contemporaries by declaring the necessity of precisely the opposite course, that is of 'demolishing completely' and rejecting as false everything contained in this archive. Instead of referring to a tradition of inquiries and findings, he would begin his reasoning from a position of absolute certainty, not simply the position agreed upon by a majority as valid or true, but a position that could not be doubted.

What is perhaps even more significant is not merely that Descartes regarded it necessary for him as an individual (and it must be as an individual, since the mere existence of other minds – how does he know that the people he sees are not automatons? – and, at the extreme, anything outside of himself must be regarded as illusory until proven otherwise) to cast off all prior knowledge and learning, but that such an action was even possible. 'I am here quite alone,' he announces at the outset of the *Meditations*, a kind of Robinson Crusoe in philosophy, but who, unlike the hapless sailor, has by an act of will removed himself to an island far from others where he can reconstruct a world of knowledge from zero, sure of the foundations that he himself has built. Here it is necessary to step outside the *Meditations* and refer to a later work, *The Passions of the Soul* (1646), that explains in detail what is presupposed in the *Meditations*, namely the ability of the soul (*l' me* or *mens*) to free itself from the world that envelopes it. Such a freedom is not easily won: 'my habitual opinions keep coming back, and, despite my wishes, they capture my belief which is, as it were, bound over to them as a result of long occupation and the law of custom' (*Meditations*, 15). In this way, the milieu or context of the philosopher is conceived of as external to him, to be accepted or rejected in part or as a totality by a mind endowed with the proper strength of will. Indeed, there is an ethical and even political dimension to the act by which one frees oneself from comfortable illusions and displays the fortitude necessary to endure the absolute solitude that is the necessary, if temporary, consequence of systematic doubt. This is what might be called the heroic moment in Cartesian philosophy: at least it would be regarded as such by philosophers as important to twentieth-century thought as Husserl and Sartre.

He will undertake to destroy the very foundations that support him, risking, as his critic Pascal noted, falling into an abyss in his attempt to find that one certain point from which adequate knowledge can be constructed and without which all hope of distinguishing truth from falsehood is lost. First, the evidence of the senses: although sometimes faulty, do they not present some indubitable truths? In a passage that occasioned a lively debate between two of France's most important philosophers (Derrida and Foucault), Descartes argues that it would appear 'quite impossible' to doubt 'that I am here, sitting by the fire, wearing a winter dressing-gown, holding this piece of paper in my hands' (*Meditations*, 13). Impossible, unless he entertains the idea that he is one of those madmen who believe that they are kings even as they languish in a dungeon. While such a notion might appear far-fetched, does not everyone, sane and mad alike, experience as real what upon awakening is revealed only to have been a dream? Are we not compelled then to doubt all that we glean from the senses? Fortunately (or so it appears for a brief moment), the subtraction of that which is derived from the senses leaves an important body of truths remaining. Surely, two and two equal four whether I am sane or mad, awake or asleep, just as a square necessarily has four sides? Here, Descartes will call upon God to sustain him in his doubt: if there is an omnipotent God, may it not be possible that He has only made it appear to our philosophical pilgrim that there is an earth, sun, sky, extended things, shapes, lines and places when in fact there are none? And if God in his infinite goodness could not be capable of such deception, is it not equally possible to entertain the idea of an evil genius, as powerful as God, but as evil as He is good? He now finds himself in the midst of a boundless, bottomless sea. Or so he fears: in fact, as is well known, doubt presupposes something that doubts. If I doubt, or think, I must exist. I may not have a body, there may not be an external world, but I nevertheless exist as a thinking thing. Descartes has not only established the priority of the individual over the collective, but of the mind over the body.

There is nothing as revolutionary in Cartesian philosophy as the notion that the knowledge of the soul must precede not only a knowledge of other bodies, but even our own body. From now on, we cannot know anything without accounting for how we know it: how do we know that we know? A study of the physical world must therefore begin with an inquiry into the soul, specifically into how it forms clear and distinct, i.e. adequate, ideas. As we have seen, the soul can know itself only by experiencing its independence from extended substance, Descartes's term for the material world; it must understand itself as a substance essentially free from space and time, and from the determinations proper to physical existence. The universe is thus comprised of two substances, the *res cogitans* and the *res extensa*, thinking substance and extended substance or thought and matter. While Descartes's ecclesiastical adversaries charged him with having thus rendered spirit (and God) irrelevant to the physical world, he argued that this freedom allowed for the possibility of the mind's mastery over itself and the bodily impulses to which it was subject.

These positions proved decisive for European philosophy. No longer was it possible to know the world without first understanding the mind that knows, which thus might appear as either the condition of or impediment to knowledge. As Guérout has argued, some of the major currents in the subsequent history of philosophy are defined by their response to this problem. Kant argued that we cannot know the things in themselves independently of the mind that knows them; instead we must remain content with the world as it appears to us, the phenomenal world. Husserl's phenomenology 'solved' this problem by means of a 'bracketing' (*epoché*) of the world independent of our knowledge and experience, and

positing an original agreement between the world as it is and the world as it appears to us. Further, the idea of a self, the 'I' of the 'I think' (*cogito*), finally separate from the world and free, as spiritual substance (*res cogitans*), from merely material determinations and able thus to direct itself, was central to the development of existentialism, especially that of Sartre.

As one of France's most important Spinoza scholars has argued, from the point of view of the perspective just outlined, Spinoza can be seen as Descartes's other, opposing his philosophy point for point. Unlike Descartes, Spinoza begins his major work, the *Ethics*, not with the I that thinks, but, on the contrary, with a set of propositions designed to prove that thought and extension or spirit and matter cannot be separate substances. The topic of Part I is, significantly, not the individual or even man, but God. Spinoza's arguments, nominally devoted to a proof of God's perfection, struck nearly all his contemporaries as a thinly disguised atheism. Drawing on theological controversies, many of which had their origins in medieval and early modern Judaism (Spinoza was born into the Sephardic community in Amsterdam, was educated in its institutions and was finally excommunicated for heresy in 1656), he argued that the notion of God as spirit, prior to matter, creating the material world and endowing it with meaning, was incompatible with the idea of God's greatness. How could spirit 'create' matter out of itself (especially if matter was regarded as inferior to spirit)? How, indeed, could there have been a moment of creation if God were truly omnipresent and all-powerful, that is a moment prior to which a part of God did not exist? How could what is eternally perfect have been lacking? Referring to a distinction between the actual and the possible, as if the latter were a kind of pre-existence, did nothing to solve the problem. The eternal and infinite has no origin, no beginning; all that can exist does: thus, 'whatever is, is in God and nothing can be or be conceived without God' (*Ethics* I, 15), just as God has no existence prior to or outside of creation. God is, according to Spinoza, an immanent cause, entirely coincident with what exists, his will nothing other than the necessity that governs nature as a whole. At the beginning of Part IV, Spinoza would go so far as to use the phrase that made him infamous: 'God, or nature', (*Ethics* IV, Preface), treating the two terms as interchangeable. It is not difficult to see how Spinoza's numerous critics regarded him as having made God disappear into creation, essence into existence and spirit into matter.

As if this were not enough to earn the enmity of theologians from all faiths, Spinoza, in the Appendix to Part I, seeks to explain the causes of the faulty conception of God that is so common and indeed so powerful that it will likely hinder the comprehension of his argument. People insist on regarding God as a transcendent cause, a cause that existed before the world and which brought the world into being to fulfil a pre-existing purpose. Such an idea is common precisely because it constitutes a projection of human experience on God (or Nature): we tend to imagine God in our own image. Spinoza, however, does not stop at the idea that the nearly universal conception of God is nothing more than an idol of human creation that reflects not the divine but the image of its creator. What philosophers in the latter half of the twentieth century have found so provocative in Spinoza's work is the argument that this projected belief in human beings as creators whose actions are undertaken with an end in view is itself false, an illusion heavy with consequences not simply for philosophy but for political and social life as well. We believe we are the causes of our actions and words, Spinoza argues, only because we are conscious of our desires to do or say something, but ignorant of the causes of our desires. We so need to feel that we are masters of ourselves in the face of a world consisting of an infinite concatenation of causes and effects whose course is indifferent to us, our welfare and

happiness, that we imagine ourselves in our supposed freedom and transcendence to be the mirror of our creator who thus functions as the guarantor of our delusions of freedom and self-mastery.

Spinoza takes up these problems in detail in Part III of the *Ethics*, where he begins by denouncing the notion that the human world transcends nature, a spiritual realm of freedom in opposition to the necessity that governs the material world. It is this conception above all that prevents us from understanding our emotions which for Spinoza are governed by the same necessity as nature. Anger, hatred and jealousy, like rain and wind, are no less necessary for being inconvenient. The most common form of the notion that the human is outside of nature is our idea of the relation of body and mind. Spinoza's theory is often referred to as parallelism: mind and body are absolutely parallel and whatever happens in or to one also happens in or to the other. Parallelism, however, is not only a term Spinoza never uses, it also fails to convey the fundamental nature of his rejection of any separation of mind and body. For him they are the same: in the same way that he can write God or Nature, he might have said spirit or matter, mind or body. In a certain sense mind disappears into body and thought into action. We believe that the mind, at least during waking hours, directs the body. We believe that when the body undertakes an action, say writing a book, painting a painting or even something as simple as extending our hand to another person, it realizes an intention that existed outside of and prior to that action. For Spinoza, this is an illusion: nobody knows what the body can do solely determined by other bodies. In fact, he suggests, our bodies are moved by other bodies (and he is very interested in the forms of corporeal social organization, such as rituals and ceremonies both secular and religious), while we imagine, much like a dreamer who believes he is talking when in fact he is silent, that we cause an action over which in fact we have no control.

The political consequences of such a positions are serious. Because mind and body are one, whatever increases or decreases the power of the body to act, simultaneously increases or decreases the power of the mind to think. In this way Spinoza, anticipating Foucault, asks us to investigate the social histories of bodies. As for Foucault, the human body is not the atom of society, a fixed and stable point of origin, but is always an aggregate itself made up of smaller bodies and capable of becoming part of a larger body (a couple, a group, a mass, a society) that is no less real because it is an aggregate. It no longer makes sense to ask whether a people have consented to their ruler (which would thus render his rule, no matter how oppressive, legitimate) or a worker to his employer (which no matter how exacting and constraining the labour would then be a legally and morally binding contract). Instead we must begin by asking whether a given relation renders bodies powerful or weak; does it increase their pleasure or pain? In this way all the justifications of domination and exploitation become untenable. In fact, Spinoza refuses every notion of disembodied right (he argues that right equals power), asking only what people have the power to do with or without legal right. Once we cease to see politics in terms of right and law, and instead focus on power, the individual can no longer be the unit of analysis. The chief political force in any society, democratic or despotic, is what Spinoza calls in his last work the multitude or the masses whose support or at least tolerance is the condition of any regime. It is easy to understand why, beginning in 1968, so many of the great commentators on Spinoza have been connected to one variety or another of marxism.

God or nature, mind or body, right or power: Spinoza's anti-transcendentalism according to which that which is expressed disappears into its expression can only extend to that

subtle matter, language. To explore this thesis, Spinoza turned his attention to the model of all texts, the Bible. He begins his discussion with a proposition that has proved oblique to many readers: the method of interpreting nature and scripture is the same. We may understand his meaning by returning to the view of nature that he rejects in the *Ethics*. For the superstitious, nature is a mere expression or reflection of something beyond it, something more real or more true: God, the Forms, etc. According to this model, one does not look at nature itself but beyond it to the ends for which it was created or the meaning that it in attenuated form expresses. Nature, from this perspective, is not primary but secondary; the operation of knowledge would be a reduction or a dispelling of nature as if it were the impediment to its own truth. In opposition, Spinoza posits the irreducibility or materiality of nature.

What does this mean for the understanding of scripture? Theologians have for centuries attributed to scripture a hidden depth, of which the literal text is but a mask. Spinoza argues that the meanings that they claim to have found hidden in its interior have in fact been added to the text. They treat scripture not as a text at all but rather as a pretext for the meanings that they will substitute for it. All their approaches amount to a denial of the text in its materiality, its irreducibility; by exhorting us to look beyond it they prevent us from knowing it. The first step in arriving at an adequate knowledge of scripture, then, is to describe its surface very carefully, even to the point of examining punctuation without assuming either coherence or sense. It may well be that certain passages literally do not make sense or are not written in the dialect or language; there may be obvious gaps and ellipses in the text. It may be the case that the text asserts as truth statements that contradict each other. Such a careful description is impossible for readers who begin by assuming the text's perfection and coherence. Their task will be different: not to describe and explain the heterogeneity, contradiction and absence of meaning that is to be found but to explain it away as mere appearance concealing the essence of the text.

Spinoza will treat it as a material, historical artefact. What are the languages of which it is comprised, from what historical period do they date, how many identifiable parts are there to scripture and who assembled them and under what conditions? If its statements are contradictory, can the contradiction be explained historically (texts written in different periods under different circumstances)? But Spinoza does not stop with these already provocative questions: it is not enough to establish the text once and for all and to explain it historically. The history of scripture is not over: it continues to produce new and different effects in new historical situations; it can even cease to mean anything at all and congeal into an indecipherable mass of paper and ink. Of course, if we follow Spinoza's reasoning to the letter, his method is not restricted to the text of scripture. On the contrary, because he rejects the most common postulates of the unity of any text, namely the notions that works originate in and express the intention of an author or that works reflect something more real than themselves which confers upon them their coherence and meaning, his critique extends to the way we read literary, philosophical and political texts as well.

We can see then that, despite certain similarities in language and some common reference points, Descartes and Spinoza stand in stark opposition: on the one hand, a philosophy of the Cogito (not just thought or even consciousness, but also the 'I' as origin of knowledge), positing the primacy of spirit over matter, of soul over body, at the extreme, a political as well as epistemological individualism; on the other, a materialism so thoroughgoing that spirit in all its forms has disappeared into matter, that the human individual is always part of larger individuals and right and law are immanent in power.

This conflict, although several centuries old, has never been more actual than now at the conclusion of the twentieth-century as the conflict to have passed through the crucible of our time unchanged: indeed, it is so intertwined with our thoughts and efforts that it is difficult to imagine a time when we will have passed beyond it.

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2. Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831)

Few thinkers have cast shadows as long on the terrain of postwar literary criticism and theory as Immanuel Kant and G. W. F. Hegel who separately and together open, exemplify and in some respects close the period of European thought known as the Enlightenment. The figures and the work of Kant and Hegel have directly and indirectly been the material from which disciplines and approaches from psychoanalytic to phenomenological criticism, political philosophy to deconstruction have built their characteristic protocols. The vexed history of their influence, waxing and waning, punctuated with ‘returns to . . .’ and disavowals of one or the other, makes up in some respects the history of modern literary theory itself.

This is a broad claim, and not self-evidently true. Literary criticism has only recently become explicitly concerned with examining its philosophical presuppositions, in ways that differ markedly from one country to another – and which may, indeed, be coming to a close as the period of ‘high theory’ wanes. For the greater part of the twentieth century the study of literature, even in settings traditionally more friendly to speculative thought than the US or England, found little of profit in taking stock of its procedures more or less systematically. Nor for that matter is it clear how Kant or Hegel’s work might further that stocktaking, once it is under way. Kant has little to say about literature, and Hegel’s interpretations of literary works have had an influence often more local than disciplinary (with the signal exception of Hegel’s profound reshaping of the theory of tragedy, achieved

in part through Bradley's renderings of the *Lectures on Aesthetics*). Very little of the practical work of literary criticism and interpretation has stood or fallen on the great questions posed and answered by German idealism.

As soon as 'criticism' gives way to 'literary theory', however, matters change dramatically. The shift from criticism to theory may in principle occur any time that one writes about texts. As a disciplinary matter, however, establishing the analytical bases of the study of literature only becomes a pressing matter in the immediate postwar period, when changes in material and political circumstances focus attention on the humanistic studies as a profession, and increasingly require of these studies different (economic, social, political) justifications. The forms that these legitimation procedures take are again quite distinct, depending on which cultural and educational tradition is at issue. Not only do the values that 'literature' and 'philosophical inquiry' hold in much of Europe (where the disciplinary border between literature and philosophy has for different reasons been fairly porous) differ from their value in the US (where until recently it has not), so do the social and economic roles played in the US and Europe by the universities where such inquiry most often takes place, though their disciplinary distinctions and pedagogical rationale derive complexly from the Encyclopaedist classificatory practices that are the indirect object of inquiry in Kant, and obviously at issue in the project of Hegel's *Encyclopaedia of the Human Sciences*. Further twisting matters, local critical traditions – whether Leavisite practical criticism, the forms of *explication de texte* in the French and Belgian *lycée* after the First World War, or the techniques of close reading developed and popularized in the US – construe and transform quite differently the various legacies of Enlightenment thought. And these, of course, become more widely available with the population displacements provoked by the Second World War, when exiled thinkers like Adorno, Wellek, Brecht, Arendt, de Man and others sought in various ways to rethink continental cultural traditions under the Cold War's light. Finally, the emergence of the thought of Kant and Hegel in central roles in the project of devising a theory of literature has much to do with the contested cultural value that the idealist tradition assumes in Europe in relation to the war itself. For the 'Enlightenment' defined and exemplified through the Weimar period the ideals of cultural literacy that the European wars so profoundly shook. Philosophical idealism embodies 'after' Verdun and 'after' Auschwitz a cultural fantasy in bitter contrast to the realities of two world wars, and is assessed, lionized or rejected in the postwar period in light of this lived contrast.

But the cultural value assumed at this time in Europe and in the United States by idealism's greatest exemplars is not expressed solely in debates over whether various strands of Enlightenment thought give rise to ideologies that lead to war, or whether a different or identical aspect provides the model for a rational public sphere that European political culture abandoned with the rise of fascism. A scattered number of counter-normative approaches to the idealist tradition are proposed in philosophical, political and literary journals immediately before and during the war and these lay the foundation for the reconsideration of Kant and Hegel's legacy that has marked continental philosophy and literary theory in the past thirty years. These counter-normative readings do not come together into anything resembling a coherent approach to the legacies of German idealism, but in retrospect their influential stress on the discontinuities of the Kantian analytics, or on the contingencies of the dialectic, seems to flow largely from their efforts to understand more precisely the place of the aesthetic in the critical and in the Encyclopaedic projects.

For Kant and Hegel, it emerges, reserve for aesthetic questions most broadly, and for

literary ones particularly, a place at the defining edge of the discipline of philosophy. At issue are not only judgements concerning the content of this or that work but also judgements that embed a certain fictionality, indeed a kind of literariness, in propositions having no explicitly aesthetic content. In each case – differently, to be sure, but with considerable and fruitful continuities – the care with which the aesthetic judgement is philosophically confined by supplementary tactics suggests the dangerous stresses its necessary presence places on the understanding: necessary both because reflecting the particularity of the sensorium and because concerned with the characteristics of phenomena that distinguish them from concepts on the one hand and from ideas on the other; confined because the ‘reflection of particularity’ on the subjective side and the ‘concern with the distinguishing character of phenomena’ on the objective side have no bounds given *a priori* in either the subject or the object, and if unconfined through one heuristic or another can thus practically consume the faculty of judgement. The resulting, complex interaction between the ‘necessary function’ and the ‘confinement’ of aesthetic judgements is played out on the question that these judgements confront before all others, and indeed which gives rise to them in the first instance: the question of the relation between the form of presentation (*stellen*) of representations to thought, and their sensible characteristics – between phenomenality and perception.

The indeterminability of aesthetic judgements contrasts markedly with the seeming historical or conceptual teleology of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* or of the three *Critiques*. Just as markedly does it contrast with the largely unexamined historicism that characterized literary studies of the prewar period, and with the purported scientificity of models of intrinsic aesthetic and cultural analysis (predominantly structuralist in inspiration) that come to prominence after the war – defined by Vincent Descombes as the historicist or culturalist positivism of European thought. The appeal of aesthetic judgements is thus easy to understand. Enlisted as models of unconfined human freedom and of human pleasure at a time when the defining metanarratives of western elite culture are in crisis, they seem at once utopian and indispensable to increasingly heterogenous societies. In keeping with this fantasy of culture’s social role, for much of the past quarter-century ‘literature’ was understood to be the aesthetic domain that most clearly staged the question of the relation between the indeterminability of aesthetic judgement and the seeming necessity of establishing determining, foundational premises for ethical judgements – staged it allegorically, referred to it fictionally, treated it thematically. During these years, and until different forms of materialist criticism (new and old historicism, cultural studies) achieved hegemony, the ‘theory’ of literature occupied itself broadly with formalizing that question and its various provisional answers (psychoanalytic, culturalist, philosophical, or more traditionally ‘literary’). At the close of the twentieth century and in the wake of various formalisms, of ‘high theory’ and of different historicisms, literary criticism and theory has assumed as the programme of cultural studies the task of re-examining the historical and conceptual legacies of the idealist construction of aesthetic judgement set definingly in the Romantic reception of Kant and Hegel’s work.

Kant and the doctrine of relative autonomy

‘Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe’, Kant concludes his *Critique of Practical Reason*, ‘the oftener and more steadily we reflect on them: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me. I do not merely conjecture them

... I see them before me, and I associate them directly with the consciousness of my own existence.' This poetical observation sets out the broad architecture of Kant's *critical* philosophy – a term understood to cover the works dating roughly from 1774 to the end of his career. The domain, limits and characteristics of judgements concerning 'the place I occupy in the external world of sense' are the subject treated in the 1781 *Critique of Pure Reason*. Judgements concerning the moral law are the province of the *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), *Metaphysics of Morals* (1797) and *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785). The human mind, Kant argues, constitutes for itself the conditions of perception and sense *before* it has any experience of this or that object – hence to make judgements concerning our 'experience' or (to use a particularly Kantian word) our 'intuition' of the 'external world of sense' is in fact to address phenomena, 'objects conforming to our mode of representation' and regulated by this mode of representation, rather than 'things by themselves' or 'in themselves' (1998 B: xviii). The critique of metaphysics built on this is devastating: the boundaries Kant sets to speculative reason are the circumstance of the self-regarding subject rather than the 'external world' of things by themselves. To confuse one with the other is to 'destroy' the 'necessary practical use of pure reason', its *moral* use. For in the domain of *moral* judgement, Kant goes on to explain, the negative task undertaken in the *Critique of Pure Reason* yields a profound, *positive* result with respect to what in the *Critique of Practical Reason* he terms the 'only idea of speculative reason whose possibility we know a priori' (5): the idea of freedom. Our 'ignorance with regard to things by themselves', it turns out, restricts our capacity to understand or to know freedom 'by itself', but not, crucially, to 'think freedom' (1998 B: xxvii). And the idea of 'freedom' is in this sense privileged not only as the *content* of thought or as the object of speculative reason (we think about the phenomenon of freedom, unable to know freedom by itself), but also as the *form* taken a priori by speculative thought in general and as its functional effect.

Kant's efforts to coordinate the domains of fundamental epistemology and of ethics, of knowledge and of desire, understanding and reason, require of him two related, controversial strategies, with profound methodological as well as thematic consequences. Both come under direct attack in the course of the twentieth century and provide the ground for some of the most far-reaching philosophical and literary-critical debates of the past quarter-century. The first concerns the role assigned in the critique of metaphysics to the notion and characteristics of the subject. The second concerns the subordination of aesthetic judgement to reason and understanding, and its simultaneous elevation to a necessary, analytic moment in the transition from epistemological to moral judgements.

Kant's subjects

Kant's critical system is indeed concerned with the status of human agents and of rational human acts, though he does not make such acts coextensive with human subjectivity or its origin. Instead, the Kantian critique of metaphysics turns upon the notion that acts (physical acts as well as certain acts of thought) originate in 'a transcendental ground of the unity of our consciousness in the synthesis of the manifold of all our intuitions' (1998, A:104). On this understanding, Kant's formulation consolidates an argument for the primacy of self-consciousness made sketchily, and with important flaws, as early as Descartes's *Meditations* – correcting and extending it to the domain of practical reason. Corresponding to the 'transcendental ground of unity' in the acting subject is the principle of the will's autonomy with regard to that act – the postulate that one's duty to moral law is

coherent and compelling only if one subjects oneself ‘only to laws given by oneself but still universal’, laws in which one can have no *particular* interest, and which are in this sense *unconditionally* compelling (*Groundwork*, 40). To give oneself such laws requires crucially, Kant suggests, the intervention of the faculty of the imagination: every decision is submitted to the imaginary test of its *outcome* and of a notional universality (one acts ‘as if’ the grounds for deciding to act held universally, and ‘as if’ the outcome of the act were immediately and exhaustively present to thought). The representation of ‘outcome’ and ‘universality’ must be radically non-empirical (otherwise every decision would be an interested, hence a conditioned one, and never in Kant’s sense a ‘free’ decision) – presented ‘as if’ they provided determining grounds for this or that decision, but also ‘as if’ entirely counter-factual. The immediate consequence of this imaginary test is the de-instrumentalization of human agents: every subject as such is presumed definitionally to be able freely and rationally to test his or her judgements in this way – to be autonomous – and cannot in consequence be construed as the means for another subject’s judgements, only (in an abstract sense) as an end.

Different and differently influential treatments of political philosophy and of philosophical ethics flow from the notions of duty and *responsibility* that this foundational description of the imaginary autonomy of the will establishes. The debt to Kant is explicit in some cases, implicit in others. The coordination of the concepts of ‘rational community’, ‘transparent communication’ and ‘public-sphere interest’ in the work of Jürgen Habermas, the influential terms in which the North American ethicist John Rawls describes the hypothetical ‘veil of ignorance’ necessary to produce just judgements in social environments (1971), the emphasis placed by philosophers like Ronald Dworkin (1977) or Alisdair MacIntyre (1981) on rights-based analyses of legal standing, all suggest the scope of the contemporary return to Kant.

Where Habermas, Rawls, Dworkin and the late Foucault may be imagined to represent a return to a (qualified) Kantian foundationalism, engagement with Kant’s critical philosophy has as often sought to provide non-foundational accounts. On the continent Nietzsche (refracted through readings of Freud, Marx and particularly of the work of Martin Heidegger) remained the primary philosophical point of reference, particularly in France and Germany. Heidegger’s engagement with Kant is constant and fruitful. For Heidegger, the emergence of the notion of the subject is associated with the epochal forgetting of the authentic relation to Being that obtained before the Cartesian, and more properly Kantian, consolidation of the ‘age of the world-picture’ – an ‘age’ (though it is also a philosophical tactic, and a style of writing) that subordinates ontological questions (concerned with the nature of Being) to epistemological ones. What Kant describes as ‘the objects’ conforming to our mode of representation’ Heidegger associates with the aligned distinctions between the apparent and the essential, between, as he puts it in *Being and Time*, the ‘outside of me [*Aussenwelt*]’ and the ‘in me [*in mir*]’ (Heidegger 1962, 204–5), between an object’s phenomenality, or appearing-for-one, and its noumenality, or being-in-itself. This evasion, he argues, finds its modern crystallization in the emergence of the category of the *subiectus* (Heidegger 1962, 317–22); in the *Critique of Pure Reason* it is tied to the complex status accorded the coming-into-images (*Verbildlichung*) of the transcendental schemata. These, Heidegger argues in *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, are images (*Bilder*) in a special sense: they are *both* removed from the empirical realm (of conditionality), *and* revealed to constitute the finitude of the ‘I’ as its being-in-time (thus making the pre-conditionality of time a non-empirical predicate of the ‘I’). This means, however, that

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