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978-0-521-57382-5 - Singularities: Extremes of Theory in the Twentieth Century

Thomas Adam Pepper

Excerpt

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Isaiah, or of Jeremiah, I did not penetrate at once, and notably the word trim, which I had never met with, in this sense, long remained obscure . . .²

I could begin at exactly the same place where I began to write the essays collected in this book – in a time that now belongs to the pastness of a past I hope never to remember – and say: I am fascinated by difficulty. This is what I have learned.

Let me try and state where I think I have come from. At the outset, I tried to formulate a set of observations concerning the relations between text and commentary in the authors whose works I was reading. I insist that the goal was, or should have been, to formulate – that is to say, to bring to utterance – and not to formalize. And thus I insist that among these texts there is no single relation but rather there obtains an open and mobile set of links, a set with no fixed boundaries of relations capable, at any moment, of being broken off and modified, but not exchanged.

For someone whose training began, by predilection, more or less, in the realm of so-called philosophical discourse, it was and still is all too easy to move along at the level of the concept. This is not what I hope to have done, although I have, no doubt, done some of it. But I admonish myself and my readers here, at the end and at the outset, against this. These admonitions toward the specific differences of each text, and against the banality of generalization, are themselves generalities, and fall into well-worn tracks.³ But now it is long after the end of a long apprenticeship, and I trust I will be forgiven for the attempt to restate, in my own terms, these problems that have come to the fore of the mind and as I see them.

Let's begin again.

In the course of a given rhetorical reading, there is a paradoxical relation between the reasons for the choice of a particular text or

² Samuel Beckett, *Molloy*, rpt. in *Three Novels by Samuel Beckett* (New York: Grove Press, 1965), 70–71.

³ The problem of enunciating this tendential attitude as a law, and thus falling into the trap that, like the principle of verifiability, it is not itself verifiable, is in fact the crux that generates so much of the power of Paul de Man's work. In the vocabulary of another tradition, we would have to call this kind of injunction toward the singularity of any text or reading a rule of *grammar*, in Wittgenstein's sense, that is to say, a rule of form. It is only, perhaps, in thinking about – and speaking about – the way in which the evidence of such a law's existence must be everywhere shown, but never said, that we will be able to speak of the recognition of event, act, or occurrence that will allow us to assert that we are no longer simply hyperformalists.

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passage for reading and the micrological or histological reading that follows upon this initial choice. This initial decision (the rhetoric of intention is particularly dangerous here, as it is not certain that one ever *chooses* a text, purely and simply) may be an ideological matter (in the technical sense, a question about the *logos*, the meaning of a text); for example, in the case where it seems that a given passage is a crux and that a successful interpretation of this text depends upon its resolution. But what follows in the rhetorical analysis has more to do with lexical considerations: *how* is this text (dis)organized, and what does this (have to) do with or to the presupposition of meaning? My question is, then, how does the lexical reading relate to the original choice of reading material by means of logical (read thematic) considerations? What is the *thematic scar* left by the necessity of the initial choice upon the lexical reading that ensues therefrom; and how does this scar structurally limit the scope of the reading, or its extension (in the logical sense of entities covered by the predicate), what we might call the reading's power? I call the thematic scar the mark left by the initial choice of a text to be read on the rhetorical procedure that treats signifiers (and not concepts). How does this scar necessitate the proviso that comes with any reading, namely, that it is a reading of only *this* text, a particular reading, but one which also confers exemplarity upon the choices it makes and forecloses?

I write these words here, in the language of a critical mode now in desuetude, not out of a desire to remain in the past, but to assert that these projects, and my habitus, began under this sign. If I have moved on – who knows where, and who would be the judge? – I still wish to exercise my liturgical practices, not automatically, compulsively, or in the mode of sterile and unanimated repetition, but in order to try to move towards the future without any false sense of security or liberation that would come from ditching the past. Better to wake up every day and make ready for the journey to Mount Moriah than always to be trying to get back to Ithaca, or to New Haven. So it is not that I shall not have moved, but that I have tried, as hard as I could, to perform my exercises starting from this one place. Accidents always happen along the way. This is the correlate, or perhaps only the restatement, of what I have said already of my desire to temper my conceptual temperament, this tempering being the enunciation of the law I have tried – but no doubt failed – because of my very desire to state it – to internalize.

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These tensions of the particular and the general, of the pressure of the move to the ontological and of the more pragmatic nominalism that says “I will have had to or have tried to begin *somewhere*,” with *some* text, in some always singular, provisional situation, no matter how well prepared the ground may be – these tensions preoccupy this space even before it is opened outright, more purely and more simply. In this realm of contaminations there is not going to be anything more than the more or less purely and/or simply. They are well known, these tensions, but they can stand bearing out and restatement, in something like an apology for having decided to – that is to say, for having recognized that it is necessary to – leave the discourse of the universal behind and to move to something more like what used to be called – may its name forever and hauntingly be praised! – the essay.

Others have occupied these spaces differently, by working on the peculiarities of the relations between examples and what they can()not be read as exemplifying – for example – or by reading the relations between formalist discourses and the remains, what gets left out of the fields surveyed by these systems as the very conditions of possibility of enunciation of the formal laws themselves. (These gestures can, and can also not be read in the register of the proverbial return of the repressed; but the use of such a vocabulary must also be interrogated in respect of the temporal schemes it brings with it. In truth, it is not a bad choice of words at this moment; for, in foregrounding the temporal sequences imposed or implied, it shows that a purportedly more steady-state and neutral-formalist discourse – which itself can be expanded to include a meta-discourse on its own conditions of possibility and what they exclude – speaks this same language in respect of temporal pattern.)⁴

There is no simultaneity of our finite reasoning, and thus we could say there is always narrative, hence allegory – even if it is impossible, in the case of most narratives, to figure out what their law is or if they have one or to find a general law of narrative.⁵

⁴ See also de Man, “Sign and Symbol in Hegel’s *Aesthetics*,” in *AI*.

⁵ We could substitute the word “allegory” for the word “sophism” in the title of Lacan’s “Le Temps logique et l’assertion de la certitude anticipée: un nouveau sophisme,” given the definition of sophism therein. And we should also note that the title of the earliest typescript of de Man’s essay now entitled “Allegory” (in *AR*), is “Narrative.” *Allegory*, therefore, is the name we use for the *Narrative* that tells the story of the undoing of the concept (often by use of example) in a pseudo-temporal sequence that is, philosophically speaking, called *Sophism*.

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But – it is not possible to leave the concept behind, or simply to leave it out. And thus we have to ask: What kind of quilting is always taking place between an avowedly *critical* discourse, a discourse that celebrates (or mourns) the fact of its anacletic relation to something necessarily anterior, that proclaims its status as an act of receiving something else, if not of a reception – what does reception mean anymore? – and the fact that such a discourse, once it overtly manifests its *ex post facto* nature, often seems to lapse into a vocabulary of necessity, of sufficient grounds, of causal explanation from *before*, as opposed to understanding from *after*? Is there a structure to be discerned behind this apparent *post hoc propter hoc*? Is it only apparent, and is it only a lapse, or a prolapse whose syncopations are dictated, perhaps, by the critical act itself?

Here, then, is my apology. Apology here means: the attempt at a statement of how one has become what one is, of how one came to write what one has written. But an apology for the itinerary back to the essay – to make a comparison (and *is* the point here that comparison always belongs to an inferior genre, is structurally thus always vulgar in its belatedness?) – must work from more formal grounds, perhaps, and less from personal ones. It should be the apology of a necessity of thought, by which any I, thinking these thoughts, would be affected. And yet it is also my apology – a fact for which I make none. It must go like this, or something like this:

I came to the field of literary studies – and not to the study of any specific, national(istic) literature – in order to continue my more or less philosophical investigations, and for essentially pragmatic, worldly reasons. It seemed that there I would be able to pursue the thoughts I wanted to pursue without being bothered by any silly person telling me whether what I was interested in or what compelled me was philosophy or not. I came to this open field, then, to comparative literature, to go on holiday from the more brutally normalizing aspects of the discourse of language-being-on-holiday. And for a while I got caught up in the necessity of the carnivalesque, of the upside-down, topsy-turvy displacements there. But this caught-uppitness was not an accident. I was disoriented. It took me years of doubt as to even the possibility of refinding my bearings, to come up with these humble excuses for excuses. But here I am, and this does not go without these

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potentially offensive words of defense. And where am I? In a department of rhetoric, in a department of French, in a department of comparative or general literature, in an independent research center sitting on top of a theology faculty? – I am everywhere and nowhere.

What I call the carnivalesque turned out to be, in fact, one part terror and one part – the major part – a wake, a scene of mourning. The hyperbolic form of this mournful terror could be stated in the constant conjunction of two words: necessary and impossible. How do you tell a story about this bizarre hendiadys, “necessary and impossible?” Where can you begin? Where can you go?

The terror was interiorized and self-imposed: You must adopt, adapt yourself to the discourse of the strictly impersonal, dry, didactic, surgical. You must always maintain the strict tension between the universality of the conceptual apparatus you should want to be abandoning and the sheerly focused, one-pointed attitude aimed always and only at the singularity of the text you are reading. Speak only of what is immediately under your gaze, which should become more and more congruent with the gaze of your words. You may only *show* the relation of these tessera to the whole; you may not *speak* of the form or of the frame, otherwise you will be ostracized. Otherwise your tessera will become our ostra.

While I insist that this terror was self-imposed, that it came out of the necessity of my own project and out of my own movements of thought, I would also like to give some figural examples of the kinds of criticism I have received concerning some of the work between these covers.⁶ One colleague said to me, for example: “You should not be writing about de Man [or, I presume, by extension, Derrida], you should be writing about, say, lyric poetry [Celan was the example used, since he was on the boards] in a de Manian fashion.” I took this as an example of the kind of false piety toward my teachers I wanted to avoid at all costs, while at the same time I knew I would have to interrogate its reasons. For me so much of the enterprise was invested in the necessity of measuring myself against the standards of my forebears, against their

⁶ On the distinction between allegorical interpretation as that which mediates between the world of phenomena and the world of ideas, and figural interpretation, which takes place between two worldly sets of phenomena, see Erich Auerbach, “Figura,” in his *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

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authority, their fecundity, that, having traveled with them for so many years, I did not feel as though I could fake the false humility of discipleship.

Another European colleague, who himself has made among the most significant contributions to the reading of the aforementioned figures, said to me: "You should be writing, say, about Merleau-Ponty [and some other, purportedly less *contemporary* thinkers]." I took this as a kind of condescension, which I couldn't swallow very well. The implication of the condescension, of his list of names as opposed to my list of names, seemed to me to be of this kind: You are an American in a department of comparative literature, and I am a European trained in the science, *Wissenschaft* – with all its attendant paradoxes – of literary interpretation. You cannot, therefore, because of your in-nate provinciality, approach these subjects, because you cannot approach them from the position of in-nate proximity from which I approach them. So don't bother, because you will always end up showing only your own ignorance.⁷

To this, which shocked me at the time and left me speechless with the shame, first of my own, followed by my recognition of his own much greater presumptuousness, I can only begin to respond now and in retrospect: to do anything other than what I will have set out to do, *here and now*, would be a cop-out, for reasons that I hope will have asserted themselves (the future perfect is a lie) constantly throughout this book. (This is an introduction, so I am entitled to lean on this assertion-through-structure I attribute, if a little faithlessly, to what follows: read the book, judge for yourselves. I will judge it more harshly than you will, but let's not get involved in one-upmanship.)

Besides, I write against the self-hating, know-nothingist aspect of American academia, the widespread tendency that respects anyone as long as he or she has an accent. In saying this, my (incorrectly) presumed nationalism will be objected to. But in fact the nationalism is on the side of that repressed (and thus more strongly maintained, more destructive) American self-hatred, which mixes ever more today with a disgusting, nativist and populist (one could say brown) tint.

⁷ See my "Fleisch und das Vergessen des Blicks," in Hinderk Emrich and Gary Smith, eds., *Vom Nutzen des Vergessens* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1996), for a detailed reading of what takes place between Merleau-Ponty and Lacan.

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And if anyone wants to accuse me of self-indulgence in recounting these stories, or of thus wanting to show my scars, I will insist on the fact that these stories are all true and at the same time are truly allegorical as I tell them here. They tell stories that contain within their individual selves (of) the defective universal structure of similar moves that happen over and over again. And my aim in telling them here, thus, is ethical.

But the last and most interesting objection I can remember was that of a friend, who deepened his friendship with me, as well as his collegueship, by *counting* the sentences in one of my essays that ended in question marks (I remember only that he mentioned a number, although I myself have never counted anything – I begin and then I lose track). “You do not write ethically,” he said.

The depth of our friendship was measured by the years of silence between us that followed. And to this objection I respond: Yours is the most important and the most interesting, the most compelling remark – along with the first objection above – because you are forcing me to interrogate the status and value of the question. In counting, there is an attention to the letter upon which are built things far from banal.

This is what I say now. Then I said, this is a grouping, a tableau of thoughts in motion. The investigations have always hardly begun, and therefore I will make no pretense at stating my remarks in a more assertoric – if not apodictic – form, which would be to mistake the form of the essay for that of the treatise. Now, and in what follows, I want to try to live up to the responsibility of addressing the ethics of the question as a mode of emphasis, or of performance that does not necessarily fall within the bounds of the conventional “rhetorical question.” To assert a problematic in the language game of questions does not either deny the validity of asking nor simply and straightforwardly ask, but points to a certain provisionality of the discourse thus advanced, if not promulgated.

And yet: I am uneasy with the “return to the ethical” in contemporary literary – or should I say, theoretical, post-theoretical? – studies. Why?

1. Because, at first appearance, any such “return” (as though one were ever doing anything other than ethics) must begin with an explicit gesture that says, I am not renouncing the attempt at

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intrinsic criticism, I am not renouncing the study of the text. Otherwise there is the grave risk that in renouncing or in being seen as renouncing the text, one will merely be aping or be seen as aping the social so-called sciences out of the insecurity that one does not have a paradigm of one's own, a body of positive knowledge or a methodology one can show when accused of knowing nothing. Thus this "(re)turn" can be taken as a reactive gesture, and furthermore as a gesture in the mechanics and service of the most terrible kind of self-hatred. If I am interested in ethics, "the ethical," etc., it has *nothing* to do with a desire to legitimate what I do in the face of the totalitarian stupidity of those who would assume that the digressive structure of my constellations is not "theoretical" – and at the same time not "wordly" – enough. (The desire for *theory*, that is, for control, is a symptom of the same kind of defensiveness as the desire to have one's intellectual concerns dictated by "the world," "the outside," etc.)

2. Because such a discourse, if it wants to lay claim to having anything to say about ethics, had better start asking questions about the status of a discourse that promises everything for and in a certain experience of the future when this future clearly is not a future which will ever be present to any kind of experience. This is a call to the examination of the provisionality of so much of contemporary thinking. The mechanics of the ethical relation, *pace* Levinas,⁸ involve a disruption of the temporal order inasmuch as the temporal order is linked to the categories of consciousness itself. This is why Levinas insists that the trace is the insertion of space into time, or that it disturbs the order of the world irrevocably. *This* is the call of the ethical, in the *irrevocable*, which will not allow us to promise anything for some future, utopian holiday. There is, at several levels, a profoundly anti-Kantian set of implications here, not only ethically, but also metaphysically speaking, and these are most certainly deeply linked.

Provisionality, which I have thus far enunciated as what came out of an attempt at a description of *terror*, turned out to be the way out of mourning and of renunciation. That is to say, I had paralyzed myself, submitted to a paralysis, because I had interpreted the problem of "the end of philosophy in the discourse of criticism" as

⁸ See his "La Trace de l'autre," in *DE*.

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so overwhelmingly insurmountable that *I couldn't move*. It took a long time for me to open my eyes again, to see through my tears, in fact, and to realize that the work of all the figures I was interested in constantly was caught up in gestures of foreclosure, of provisionality – what I have called in some places radical provisionality – in a recourse to the pragmatic, to the occasional, to the event, act, occurrence, singularity – what can and does “fly in from the outside.” (From “A large hall, many guests, whom we were receiving,” to “Suddenly, the window opened, and I saw . . .”) I had to turn from the paralysis of renunciation to the more or less ethical attitude of adopting this renunciation as itself what there was to be read and analyzed.

(Often I have contemplated writing an opera, which I destine for the beginning of the millenium. It is called *Freud's Dreams*, and it consists of three acts: the first stages the Dream of Irma's Injection, and concludes with the silent scream of Freud looking down Irma's throat; the second stages the Wolf Dream, and requires cutting and pasting for the insertion of various mythological themes and variations; the third recurs to The Dream of the Burning Child. Why is it that no one has seen or heard that all of these key dreams are about singing, shrieking, screaming, about the relation between silence and screaming? The surge of the real in each dream [the formula of trimethylamin, the scream of the Wolfman, the dead child who speaks to his father, and says, “Father, don't you see I'm burning?”] – all of these occurrences call out of their contexts the way a text calls out to be read. The first parts of these dreams are regressions toward the absolute singularity of these events, in the way that readings do not dismiss contexts, but try to uncover the moment of their irruption into text.)

Hence the gathering of these essays, painstakingly planned and unplanned, and which I put together under the title *Singularities*. (I could have used many titles – *Mourning Becomes Being*, or *Toward the Non-Thematic* was another that suggested itself to me. Mourning certainly becomes *my* being. I could write an entire essay that would consist of nothing but titles – that would be good, a strong gesture.) The impulses for these essays came on a number of occasions over several years. The tones and scopes differ wildly.

I begin with love. – Romance, that is. I wrote the essay on Adorno