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978-0-521-03061-8 - Theatres and Encyclopedias in Early Modern Europe

William N. West

Excerpt

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Introduction: Circles of learning

Great movements begin with ideas in people's heads.

—Isaiah Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*

The culture of early modern Europe was a theatre culture, fascinated by ostentation, performance, pretense, and pretentiousness of all kinds. But it was also an encyclopedia culture, obsessed with collecting and sorting information, diligently reducing knowledge to the possession of discrete facts, driven by the desire to map the world's order and to construct a universal theory of everything.¹ The articulation of these two institutions – the ideas and the practices of theatre and the encyclopedia – upon and against each other in fifteenth-, sixteenth-, and seventeenth-century Europe is the topic of this book.

Public theatre and encyclopedic texts seem in some ways to be almost antithetical objects. What can private readership and public spectatorship, knowledge and appearance, surface show and deep truth have to do with one another? They were each, in different ways, circles of learning, the literal meaning of *encyclopedia* and the meaning that seemed to inhere in the theatre's distinctive "wooden O." Each made a claim, at least initially, to represent the manifold of the world in literally or metaphorically circular form – that is, with completeness, perfect symmetry, and self-containment. In early modern Europe, the ideas of these two institutions were used to define one another. Compendious textual "Theatres," with running metaphors of audiences and actors demonstrating the theatricality of the book, or performed dramas that took the moral universe as their theme, suggest a conceptual link between these two seemingly distant sources of knowledge and authority. What they share – at least what they were imagined to share – was a conception of knowledge as the ordered representation of everything. This order was seen as difficult to grasp and sometimes even deceptive, but not as dynamic. That is, however mysterious it might be, it was stable; its order was the order of a structure of atomized elements arranged in a static relation to one another rather than as a changing vector or varying pattern. It was imagined as *spatialized* and *visual, objective* in the sense that it existed independently of its knowers. The encyclopedia as the repository of the elements that made up the world and the theatre as their place

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of display were thus linked. During the course of the sixteenth century, as actual theatres were built in England and Europe, the kind of knowledge associated with them changed. Instead of mimicking the static visuality of the encyclopedia, the theatre revealed itself as a space of duplicity and equivocation where word and spectacle, or indeed all different kinds of discourse, could be placed in uneasy conjunction. In the seventeenth century, the encyclopedia followed suit, revising its earlier self-representation as a frozen echo of the world to a more fluid one, evolving eventually into ideas of experimentalism and the possibility of quantifying and organizing human action. To put timeless knowledge into play within the human realm of events was in a sense to perform it, to understand by acting. Between experimental science and the disciplines of authority, between encyclopedia and theatre, there developed in early modern Europe a different standard of knowing that I call the performance of knowledge.

Before a theatre was a real space in which to enact plays, the theatre was an idea built around a word that referred to an object that no longer existed except in texts, in which its attributes, functions, and powers changed. Roughly the same period that saw the construction of the first physical theatres in Italy and England also saw the development of a new proper term for the universal texts that previously had been given titles like *speculum*, *thesaurus*, and of course *theatrum*. The word “encyclopedia” was newly coined by fifteenth-century humanists who misread it from their texts of Pliny and Quintilian, while the term “theatre,” for the first time since the fall of the Roman Empire, referred to an actual physical structure. “Encyclopedia” and “theatre” were thus both, in different ways, as new to the fifteenth century as the objects they described. One of the dominant ideas about the nature of the theatre in the sixteenth century was that it resembled that other new, still mysterious and imperfectly defined object, the encyclopedia. Early modern encyclopedias presented themselves as textual theatres, where all knowledge was represented as objectified and displayed as if on stage. Medieval and early modern plays, similarly, often took encyclopedic themes as their topics – the mysteries of nature, universal history, the world of learning. Just as medieval drama often belies or at least complicates its supposedly didactic aims, though, the early encyclopedia approached the universal knowledge it depicted with a sense of playfulness and skepticism missing in later versions, from its great eighteenth-century descendant, the *Encyclopédie* of Diderot and D’Alembert, to the present web-based *Britannica*. Both early modern theatre and encyclopedia show a marked awareness of the impossibility of their projects – namely, that the representing thing and the represented thing should become one in the representation – and this sense of impossibility in each is the basis for their unstable relations to one another. In their combination of these two conflicting tendencies between showing and knowing, displaying and hoarding, encyclopedia and theatre outlined – *within* each of their separate discourses and practices as well as *between* them – a

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transitional form of knowledge between the more familiar modern form and its medieval precursors.

In his *Image of Governauce* (1541), a treatise on the ideal management of the state, Thomas Elyot proposed an educational system that combined theatre and encyclopedia into a unified whole. The wise emperor of Elyot's text constructs

a new library, garnishing it as well with most principal works in every science, as also with the images of the authors . . . which library was divided into sundry galleries, according to divers sciences, all builded round in the form of a circle, and being separate with walls one from another.²

The library's circular shape echoes that of the theatre, while the clear divisions between fields of study – the quadrivium of Geometry, Astronomy, Arithmetic, and Music – show it to be firmly within the encyclopedic tradition of the liberal arts. The theatre's circle and the contents of human learning are the two components from which the idea of the encyclopedia is generated – the Greek *enkuklios paideia* becomes, through a jarringly literal translation into Latin, the *orbis disciplinae*, or the circle of learning, or, as Elyot defined it in his *Dictionary* (1538), “the circle or course of all doctrines” (s.v. “Encyclios, & Encyclia”).³

The library, though, is only half of Elyot's complete educational system. It is complemented by an actual theatre building: “Many would report to the common houses called *Theatres*, and purposing some matter of philosophy, would there dispute openly” (*Image*, 42r–v). This theatre is not the theatre of Shakespeare, Marlowe, Alleyn, Burbage, the playwrights and entrepreneurs of the generation after Elyot, nor even that of Elyot's contemporaries, like John Bale or Nicholas Udall, who sought to harness the power of theatrical performance to the pedagogical ends of Protestantism and Tudor rule. There is no suggestion in Elyot's text that he even considers contemporary drama when he mentions his theatre. Instead of providing entertainment, Elyot's “common houses called *Theatres*” provide the opportunity for the students to keep up their skill in the arts of the trivium, Grammar, Rhetoric, and Logic, “disput[ing] openly” their philosophical topics. In contrast to the private contemplation of the library, Elyot's theatre provides a public forum for public skills.⁴ Together the theatre and the encyclopedic library form a single system for a complete humanist education in the liberal arts. For Elyot, the areas of the theatre and the library are contiguous and complementary; they have different objects but the same didactic goal (*Image*, 41r–42v). In fact, the circularity of the library and the vivid statues and images with which it is decorated mark it as a kind of asymptotic ideal for the theatre as a perfectly legible spectacle of knowledge. The encyclopedic theatre is a practical ordering of space that enables it to hold knowledge and to mark it as meaningful, so that a later reader might draw the collected wisdom forth at his leisure. For Elyot and for his peers, there is no tension between the two seemingly unlike conceptions of theatre and encyclopedia, with his theatre being no more based on feigning

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than his encyclopedic library. Elyot's library, like his imaginary theatre, is rather a space of exposition than production, where the statues and images, like the theatrical disputants, display their cases "openly," apparently without the possibilities of dramatic recognition or reversal.

For Elyot, the theatre is also subject to the same authority as an encyclopedic work, which is the authority of the prince to control the meaning of things: "teaching representeth the authority of the prince." When Dionysios, the tyrant of Syracuse, was expelled from his city he fled to Italy and became a schoolmaster, and thus was able to gloat that, "although Sicilians had exiled him, yet in despite of them all he reigned, noting thereby the authority that he had over his scholars."⁵ The prince also controls the meanings disseminated in the theatre, which makes theatre as useful as any other pedagogical tool for the production of knowledge. Even when theatre is not meant to be strictly didactic, its reception remains for Elyot under the prince's control; it makes up, after all, part of the apparatus of the perfect educational system in *The Image of Governauce*. As emperor, Elyot tells us, Nero required attendance at his own theatrical performances, and relied on his imperial power to enforce the appreciation of the audience. Anyone who slept or seemed bored was struck in the face by one of Nero's slaves,

Or if anyone were perceived to be absent, or were seen to laugh at the folly of the emperor, he was forth with accused as it were of misprision. Whereby the emperor found occasion to commit him to prison, or put him to tortures. (*Governour*, 23r)

Nero enforces a particular kind of enjoyment with as much authority as Elyot's own king enforced religious orthodoxy. To misprise, to refuse the meaning offered by the prince or even to fail to respect its intent, is both epistemological failure and civil disobedience. In a sense, no distinction is made between teaching and entertainment, though not in a realization of the Horatian requirement that art be "dulce et utile."⁶ What entertains in this example does not necessarily teach anything except the extent of the prince's authority to monitor all interpretive activity. The encyclopedia and the theatre are conceptually identical – not merely similar, but in fact versions of the same idea. Together they present a controlled, organized expression of reality.

The shifting relations between encyclopedia and theatre depicted by Elyot are typical in their implicitness and mobility of those in the Renaissance. It is impossible to argue for a single sustained relation between them; what is striking is how frequently there seems to be *some* relation, so that the mention of one form will draw in a discussion of the other, whether the relation is one of likeness, opposition, synecdoche (the theatre is the vehicle in which the encyclopedia is displayed and the encyclopedia is the depiction of the greater *theatrum mundi*), analogy (the theatrical relation of audience and actor suggests a structure for the relation of philosopher to truth), or something less clearly

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defined. During this period theatre and encyclopedias serve as Other to each other, as terms and things that hover between an objective reality and an equally important figurative valence. Since each is equally universal and equally capable of encompassing any term that is opposed to it, although usually in different ways, they provide each other with an unassimilable – or rather, semi-assimilable, since they are always in conjunction, but no more – difference that lets each pretend to a kind of positive existence. One way to determine what is theatrical is to set it against a spectacle that is whole, accurate, or complete; one way to define an encyclopedia is to show that it is not feigned, superficial, or merely pleasurable like the spectacles of the theatre.

The connection of theatre and knowledge has a long history prior to the Renaissance. It was in part by drawing on the history of this relation between being and pretending that Renaissance culture developed its own understanding of the relation of the two categories, working with late antique encyclopedic writers like Martianus Capella, Macrobius, Isidore, and the Augustine of *The City of God*, medieval compilers like Vincent of Beauvais and Bartholomaeus Anglicus, and the newer conceptions of the encyclopedia advanced by Angelo Poliziano and Guillaume Budé. As it developed in humanist culture, the unique role of the encyclopedia was to educate the self in ethics, the total field of human relations. Quite accidentally, the public theatre proved to offer the same education – not by showing a true content, but through its complex negotiations of desire, authority, vision, language, and cultural and physical structures. But the idea that not only do seeming and being stand in a particularly significant relation to one another, but that that relation has a practical analogy in the relation of the theatre to the total knowledge provided by philosophy, goes back to Plato's *Republic*, when Sokrates is questioning his interlocutor Glaukon about the nature of philosophy in the passage that serves as this book's epigraph (*Republic* V, 475c–e). Plato links the lover of wisdom (*philosophos*) and the lover of dramatic spectacle (*philotheamones*) as both opposites and, strangely, as doubles. While Glaukon distinguishes absolutely the eager and careless love of novelty and spectacle of the lovers of theatre from the serious inquiry of the lovers of wisdom, at least etymologically all that separates the spectators (*philotheamones*) from the philosophers (*philosophoi*) is the change in suffixes from *-theamones*, “watchers,” to *-sophoi*, “wise men.” The distinction is in fact still less clear cut. More than merely in the words, the *philotheamones*, “lovers of spectacle,” provide a physical, sensible model for the philosophers who here seem so elusive to Glaukon. Those who love to look, whom Glaukon finds so out of place among the philosophers, are *like* the lovers of wisdom (*homoious men philosophois*) who have also lost their place in society. The lovers of spectacle may be out of place among the philosophers, but the philosophers are *atopoi*, placeless, too, perhaps because they delight in the process of learning rather than in its goal, wisdom,

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and take in indiscriminately the show of truth and what only looks like it. The philosopher differs from the playgoer only in that he looks at the truth uncovered and visible (*alêtheia*); he too is a kind of “spectator of truth.” While Plato sets up a distinction between these two viewers, the analogy suggests that a philosopher is not simply an onlooker of an unsuspecting reality, but one towards whom reality is directed as if in performance.

The implications of this passage about the complex relation between viewer and spectacle shape how theatre and philosophy are seen by readers and writers in Europe over the next two millennia. First, there is a separation, at least physical and perhaps psychological or ontological, of the roles of spectator and performer. Second, on both sides of the stage there is an awareness of the tacit rules that govern the performance and allow it to proceed. Finally, there is a residue of extradramatic reality that inheres in every performance, making even its feigning not the opposite of knowing, but something more like its declension. Although in one sense opposites of each other, spectation in the theatre and investigation of truth in the world are connected by a flexible bond of likeness, contrary but polar, so that they are both opposed and linked to each other.

This relation of congruence between seeming and knowing appears antithetical to some of the most powerful and productive tenets of philosophy as it develops in Europe: that appearances deceive, that truth is hidden from the casual glance and buried deep within things, that the labor of knowing is not the same as the pleasure of watching a drama. Knowledge and drama brush continually against each other, even serve to define each other, but the culture in which knowledge and spectacle are equal is always represented as one that is alien to the definer: oral instead of literate, “primitive” or decadent rather than modern, with all the allusive relations that these terms imply.⁷ But the ascription of difference in Plato and in the unspoken traditions of European thinking relies on another sameness, as Plato says a *likeness*, that leads from drama – in Greek, an action – to knowledge and back again to action by way of the theatre – from the Greek word for a place of looking. This counter-tradition that delight in what is feigned has a bearing on the knowledge of what is true is just as old and august as the more familiar one that opposes pleasant deception and knowledge. Aristotle, in the opening chapters of *Metaphysics*, remarks that “The lover of tales (*philomuthos*) is in some sense a lover of true knowledge, because a myth is composed of wonders” (I, 2. 10, 982b). Aquinas’ comment on this passage is even more direct, although no more clear about the relation than Aristotle or Plato: “The lover of tales is some kind of lover of wisdom” (*philosophus aliquantulum est philomythes*). The Aristotelian linkage is more concerned with the fictional plot than with its display, but the idea that links what is played as in a theatre with what is in reality remains a shaping one.

Plato’s two most important translators in the Renaissance, Marsilio Ficino and Johannes Serranus, pass over without comment the section of the *Republic*

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in which Sokrates tentatively likens the philosophers and the playgoers. If anything, they weaken the homology of *philotheamones* and *philosophoi*, and the one between the *philotheamones* of plays and the *alêtheias philotheamones*, by translating the first as “qui spectaculorum avidi sunt” and the second as “veritatis inspicendi cupidus.”⁸ Serranus almost pointedly leaves Ficino’s words for the cluster of *philotheamones* unchanged. He is rarely this generous to his predecessor’s Latin translations of the Greek; it is as if perhaps he is unsure of having understood it this time himself. In general, though, Serranus seems to be particularly at pains to point out the gross incongruity of the playfulness of the theatre and the serious business of philosophy. When in the *Laws* Plato stoops to discussing the appropriate penalties for those who cheat in theatrical competitions, Serranus sneers in a rare marginal note, “Plato ought to be more careful about being so concerned about the theatre in these matters.”⁹

Serranus’ translation of the works of Plato was the most highly visible one for writers and readers in early modern England and indeed throughout Europe.¹⁰ His preoccupation with distancing Platonic philosophy from its stagy likenesses thus has the effect of driving the connection between these two positions into the center of neo-Platonic thought in the later Renaissance. In the introductory epistle, Serranus proposes a series of interpretive strategies by which he will be able to separate “true Philosophy from the philosophic buskin (*cothurno philosophico*), the true use of Philosophy from its abuse.”¹¹ What this suggests that he fears is not *Philosophia cothurnata*, the costuming of philosophy, but the donning of philosophic costume, *cothurnus philosophicus* – the way that what should be the kernel of wisdom can suddenly be worn on the outside as a disguise, with no immediate signal given that it is any less legitimately philosophy. What he argues against is not false philosophy, but the abuse of a philosophy that is presumably true by, specifically, its display as a spectacle.

But Serranus slips the players he has expelled from his *Republic* back into his own philosophy. He returns obsessively to his theatrical metaphor throughout his introduction, undermining the distinction he establishes between true philosophy and its mimic counterpart each time he asserts it. Queen Elizabeth I, the dedicatee of his volumes, he says, is fortunate to have had a front-row seat for the tragedies that sweep Europe, just as if they were tragic spectacles, rather than taking part in them.¹² Part of Serranus’ dedication to the first volume is also a defense of philosophy against its real or imagined critics; Serranus assures the reader that he has prepared for this defense because “I was not ignorant that I would incur the diverse judgments of men when I made my entrance in so famous a theatre . . .”¹³ It is hard to say whether the theatre here is the (good) arena of legitimate academic give-and-take or the (bad) broils of bean-counting scholasticism; before we imagine that the word can imply only the latter, we should recall that the reception of Serranus’ translation was favorable enough that it provides us with the Stephanus numbers still in use

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today. The spectacles of academic debate are also legitimated by the larger spectacle that contains them. One of Serranus' defenses of studying pagan philosophy is that "it gives pleasure to track down causes and the effects of causes in this theatre of the Universe."¹⁴ Whether the theatre of learned society is philosophical or spectacular, the theatre of the Universe must be a philosophical one if Serranus' defense is to make sense; while *effects* may be ascribed to the deceptive appearances of a theatre of the world, *causes* cannot be.

As he begins his argument for the seriousness and utility of philosophy, Serranus takes on the same tones that his rough contemporaries in England will take in defending the theatre:

nor in a matter of such importance do we lack solid reasons, by which it is agreed that we have hardly played at working (*ludere operam*) in this affair, but that a task both pleasing to God and useful to the Church has fallen to us In this defense of my project, I am witness that it was proposed to me to satisfy good and learned men, not rash fools (*improbis momis*), for whom it is easy enough to carp (*mômeisthai*), but not so easy in fact either to imitate (*mimeisthai*) or to correct what they find fault with.¹⁵

Serranus is alluding to a saying attributed to another famous compiler, the painter Zeuxis. In another story, recorded by Pliny, Zeuxis inscribes under the painting of an athlete that had attracted criticism, "One may more easily mock (*mômêsetai*) than imitate (*mimêsetai*) this."¹⁶ *Momi* are wielders of shallow and brutal criticism and the frequent targets of apotropaic gestures by humanists and some of their favorite classical authors; they appear in Lucian's *How to Write History* and Erasmus' *Praise of Folly*.¹⁷ On the one hand, then, the readers are told not to be like the ignorant clown of the theatre who ridicules what he cannot improve or understand. The alternative, though, is equally theatrical – the understanding philosopher will be not so much an interpreter as a mimic, one who participates in *mimêsis*.¹⁸ Even more definitively than Plato's analogical relationship between the lover of wisdom and the lover of spectacle, Serranus' involved text implicates, without offering a means of untangling them, three different images of philosophical investigation: the pursuit of knowledge as vision of truth, its pursuit as spectacle, and the imitative performance of drama. The reader can respond as a good actor or spectator or as a bad actor or spectator – but his response is always figured in terms of some role that he would have in relation to a play, an enactment of one kind or another.

This might seem to be only another skirmish in the old quarrel between philosophy and poetry, albeit a poetry exclusively imagined as dramatic, but Serranus closes his defense with a gesture that forces us to reappraise philosophy, too, in a narrower scope. Serranus sympathizes with the impression that Plato is difficult and disorderly, and in his text and translation he offers a new ordering of the dialogues (which, like the pagination of this edition, remains standard today), changing their traditional grouping by tetralogies into one that

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is thematic (*Opera* [1578], **. iiiiv). This new arrangement, together with Serranus' commentary, reveals

an organization of universal learning (*universae doctrinae syntagma*) composed from the very words of Plato and woven together similarly, so that for complete and absolute learning nothing will be seen to be lacking.¹⁹

Serranus further asserts that with proper care for organization, it can be shown that Plato and Aristotle are not in opposition, and further, that there is nothing in Aristotle that Plato had not at least alluded to first. This, Serranus promises, is his next project:

One thing remains, but very necessary in our judgment: that we will show to you, reader, a *summa* of universal learning (*universae doctrinae summam*) gathered out of various places and put together, in a single body, so to speak, and illustrated indeed by the application of examples, by comparison of Aristotle and other authors; that whatever has been variously scattered and dispersed (*variè disiecta atque disseminata*) may be brought back opportunely into a single whole, with individual elements called back to their groups, and with their use indicated.²⁰

For Serranus, Plato contains all knowledge already; what is needed is an effort of organizing and arranging the discrete elements of his works, illustrating and expanding on them with reference to other writers, to reveal this “complete and absolute knowledge” in all its clarity and totality. Serranus never seems to have written this work, which would have been a kind of Platonic encyclopedia. Since it promised to indicate the proper use of what it contained, it no doubt would have definitively answered the question of how to tell “true Philosophy from the philosophic buskin, the true use of Philosophy from its abuse.” Serranus' final answer to the problem of spectacular, theatrical philosophy comes in the form of the promise of an encyclopedia.

During the Renaissance, the likeness of theatre and encyclopedia became visible precisely because for the first time it was being called into question. Earlier treatments had not felt this as strongly as a tension – the encyclopedia's project was seductive but also impossible, and treatments were therefore both ironized and serious in a way that is difficult to characterize systematically. Such a text could both contain useful information organized into a world-system that described the order of things *and* treat its knowledge with a playfulness that continuously mocked its own pretensions. We are currently undergoing a similar shift from the concept of objectified knowledge as commodity to one that incorporates many of the ideas of knowledge as performance banished by the thinkers of the Enlightenment. The period of the museum-as-archive, where knowledge is stockpiled and which one visited to observe the noteworthy objects of the past, is ending. Instead, attendance increases in the museums-as-experience, for instance at the Holocaust Museum in Washington or the

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Viking Village in York, where the claim is that you do not look at a collection from the outside, but experience it – its “sights, sounds and smells,” as the brochure from the Viking Village proclaims – from within. We remain interested in objects, but more than ever we desire intercourse with them instead of distanced gazing. Our problem – at least as we cast it – becomes one of devising the means by which such objects can speak for themselves and address us, can offer themselves up to us free from mediation. For an answer we turn to generally representative space, a space that itself means nothing because it is separated from the “real world” but which for the same reason can be given any number of forms. This space is the space of the encyclopedia, the circle of learning of the theatre as it was originally conceived, and we turn to it now because we feel that we can no longer experience the real itself, but must somehow remake and refind it. But such spaces with their earnest commitment to fidelity, or at least to faithful copying, trivialize the real. When New York or Paris or Venice is realized as a casino in Las Vegas (or Siena in Reno) instead of as a city with its history, its residents living and dead, there is necessarily some attenuation of what constitutes a place or even an experience. Such experiences reduce experience to the expected and even the stereotyped. They are, in a sense, abstract theories posing as experiences. The same transition occurs between encyclopedia and theatre in the early modern period and is interrupted by the process of the Enlightenment. Both encyclopedia and theatre begin by offering themselves as kinds of displays for their passive viewers. As they develop in practice, though, the theatre is realized as an experience, not a spectacle, while the encyclopedia remains a closed collection of elements.

Thomas Elyot and Johannes Serranus introduce a historical period within which the relation of theatre and encyclopedia changed from an imaginary one, based on the ideas about two non-existent objects that were assigned similar characteristics, to a real one. In early modern Europe the idea of the theatre preceded the material theatre, shaping its subsequent history even as actual theatres broke down the assumptions surrounding them.²¹ The concepts that developed around the word “theatre” in the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance crucially shaped the development of physical theatre buildings in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.²² Unlike the materialist understanding, though, this placement of the idea before its manifestation is not a misrecognition of material elements as mental ones, but the analysis of the development of mental concepts in the absence of their real equivalents so that they apply a shaping pressure to their eventual realizations. It remains, in other words, materialist, but a kind of materialist intellectual history rather than the ideal materialism that Michel Foucault criticized when he observed that the physical arrangement of space alone is not enough to determine the discursive formations that are connected with it.²³ Taken in this light, the epigraph from Isaiah Berlin becomes non-trivial – that the weight of ideas, of mental concepts and