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978-0-521-46584-7 - Anti-Mimesis from Plato to Hitchcock
Tom Cohen
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INTRODUCTION



The legs of sense



These are moments when something powerful – and dangerous – is happening. Figuration is about resetting the stage for possible pasts and futures. Figuration is the mode of theory when the more “normal” rhetorics of systemic critical analysis seem only to repeat and sustain our entrapment in the stories of the established disorders. Humanity is a modernist figure; and this humanity has a generic face, a universal shape.

Donna Haraway, *Ecce Homo, Ain't (Ar'n't) I a Woman, and Inappropriate/d Others: The Human in a Post-Humanist Landscape*

To convert mimesis is to virilize it.

Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *History and Mimesis*

The essays in this volume are geared toward asking a recurrent series of questions: what is the interventionist role of “reading” (indeed, of too close reading) after the era of cultural studies? How does the materiality of language re-assert itself as a transformative agent in reading canonical writings from a post-humanist perspective? How do we exceed, today, the ideologies of retro-humanism in the various forms it takes on the right and the left? How much has a mimetic bias to the traditions of interpretation constituted a conservative politics of its own, and is there, today, an anti-mimetic or anti-representational politics located in the activity of reading?

Each of these issues is located in a history. If I choose to make “materiality” or the materiality of language the touchstone from which to undertake a series of transvaluative readings (and the Nietzschean echo is unavoidable), it is nonetheless with a particularly unromanticized notion of the material in mind. What I mean does not point to a material, historical narrative which situates a textual event, but rather the manner in which the facticity of the textual event itself is thematized on the level of inscription, sound, letters, signature, and other figures; not as “formalist” elements of play divorced from the realm of experience and social change, but as active agents of transformation in the inner history of reading/writing itself.

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Accordingly, these essays “return” to a scene that has been occluded during the return to history of the 80s. What the reader is asked to recall is the odd loop that the drift from high theory (post-structuralism and deconstruction) to neo-pragmatism, new historicism, and finally identity politics has entailed. While a thumb-nail sketch is here called for, it is not only a caricature, since one of the interesting phenomena of historicizing the swing from “theory” toward “practice,” from the linguistic to the political, has in many ways been how that move effected the opposite of what was intended. The clichés that associate the “nihilism” of deconstructive techniques with apolitical “play,” and political engagement with a return to the world have not always played as predicted. To begin with, a certain alliance between the right and elements of the left against textualism that insisted on a return to the agency of the subject (and a requisite intentionality) can be said to have produced a very different outcome than that which the left, in any event, desired. Rather than a return to history in some definitive way, there has been on the whole a regressive drift back into the neo-conservative right in the 90s. Indeed, it seems at times that the rhetoric of the political – while correctly aimed and in many ways effective (though we can as readily attribute “multi-culturalism” to demographics as to theory) – is if anything a return to the fold of that *mimetic ideology* that determines the arguments that support traditionalist humanism. A covert theologism and anti-intellectualism have not been without consequence as well, even as a “crisis in the left” has become evident. If the final swing away from high theory has been toward the balkanized field of identity politics with its diverse political agendas and attendant return to “strategic” foundationalism, it may indicate less that the renown “death of the subject” was announced too early than itself be the after-effect of that event, a parade of the undead. It is fairly easy, today, to see new historicism as itself a Reaganite phenomenon, with its reclamation of the semantic reserves of reference and its speculative mimeticism. My point in this digression is not to seize on a deviance within the movement back to representationalism, but to suggest, emblematically, a blind spot within it – what I call its mimetic ideology – that may be structural and ultimately aesthetic. It at times seems that the (re)turn into *representationalism* has involved a larger form of cultural hegemony, an aesthetic regime based on the prevalence of a certain trope, mimesis, that, when identified with “the political,” displays an often suspect complicity (and even ahistoricity).

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of its own. My point in the following essays is to raise and rethink this question by asking if we have not missed something in dismissing as “formalist” concerns with the materiality of language as such, and whether there is not an *anti-mimetic politics* in post-humanist reading?

The very neatness, however, of the official history of recent critical development may be a bit too eudemonistic, a bit too pat. For if we have supposedly surpassed “theory” (textualism, deconstruction, post-structuralism) by returning to “practice,” and have finally engaged politics and the important questions of democratic institutions, yet there seems to be a counter-narrative that haunts this story – evident in the return, nationally, to a greater conservatism rather than the opposite. Certainly, in the official narrative, there has been no “other” so universally accessible of scapegoating as the incipient formalism of close reading. It is interesting that even the official recuperation of Derrida after the “death” of deconstruction has had to pass through various purging rituals. According to one narrative, spawned by Gasché’s *The Tain of the Mirror* and recently codified in a piece in *PMLA* by Jeffrey Nealon (“The Discipline of Deconstruction,” *PMLA* [October, 1992]), Derrida was wrongly appropriated by “American deconstruction” (the Yale School in the first instance), and subsequently misread as other than what he really is, a “philosophical” text not about literature. If he is reappropriated by philosophy (thus purified as an origin), his text can be recuperated not only for that restricted domain but more generally for post-liberal politics. The castigation of deconstruction as apolitical and text-enclosed was not wrong, only misapplied to Derrida. The partitioned scapegoat that then becomes the “American” wing of deconstruction, with its rank textualism and incipient “nihilism,” is best demonstrated by the vulnerable name of “de Man.” According to this story, de Man was primarily extending the methodology of formalist new criticism, making the form of close reading he practiced or spawned all the more politically limited and dubious: by purging “deconstruction” of this American wing, in some extended sense, Derrida can be recuperated, purged, and re-admitted to the domicile.

Yet, as I said, there is something not only too pat but deeply evasive in the above narrative. Indeed, the scandal going into the gos is not the conservatism of post-structuralism (a claim supplanting that of its “nihilism,” which is only the short-hand used about those installing a different model of meaning from the perspective of those standing to be supplanted) but that of factions of the left and various

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anti-theory pragmatists. To begin with, the very accusation of “formalism” itself is one that has long concealed a potential repression. Why would “formalism” be so universally and routinely castigated if it did not pose, or conceal, a deeply material threat? Indeed, some impasses in theory or anti-theory today can be traced, in some ways, to a confusion that inhabits this site. However necessary as a recent moment in critical development, it may turn out that a phenomenon like the ferocious abjection of de Man – through whatever narrative devices (war-time writings, new critical links) – has more to do with the way in which his work (and *late* work in particular) undermines the broad-based *mimetic ideology* of cultural and critical thought, than any arguments of a methodological, “moral,” or historical nature. It may even be, keeping the name de Man in mind here for its iconic value, that rather than turning aside from the direction pointed to in his late work – a turn toward the materiality of inscription as a means of addressing “history” in non-mimetic terms – an *acceleration* of some of its micro-textual elements might be first considered in order to break through to a different concept of *mimesis* itself. Like the late Lacan, the late de Man might be said to turn increasingly toward a concept of “the Real” beyond the meliorations of historicism, identification, or the “symbolic,” only instead of hypothesizing the hoary epiphanies of “the Thing” outside of language (as we find, say, in Slavoj Žižek’s ideology critique), de Man posits a facticity of *inscription* situated in the crossings and erasures of historically encrusted signifying chains (see “Hypogram and Inscription,” in *Resistance to Theory* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986, 51]). It may be that, in certain respects, the past decade has been regressive – a partial counter-revolution, in the name of “History” (or, worse, historicism), returning to the very *humanist model* that had been, indeed, intricately jeopardized. Such a model would have been present within the academic institutions of knowledge management – institutions persisting in a state of denial of the very practical collapse of the educational system tied to them. Perhaps this untracked drift of elements of the left toward the right is best exemplified by the ideology of (neo)pragmatism as genealogized by Cornel West in *The American Evasion of Philosophy* (1989), where the call to political activism under the ruse of American nationalism (opposed to its Euro-theoretical “other”) masks a return to a theologically constructed communitarianism that operates like a panopticon of surveillance while restituting the humanist subject as its own formalist premise.

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The premise that this book wants to re-open is not that a “return to ‘reading’” is at hand in a simple or cyclically formalist sense – like a retreat into fetishist pleasures before the impasses of internationalism, identity politics, and formal democracy – but that a radical form of textualism remains a pivotally transformative option on the table today, one in which the politics of mimesis can, in ways, be particularly well addressed. Further, that it is a necessary option in securing a post-humanist landscape.

The concept of reading I put forward in these essays asks where a focus on a linguistic *materiality* that precedes figuration can be utilized as a pivotal moment to get beyond or out of mimetic interpretation (or to *alter* the concept of mimesis itself). Moreover, it points to a post-humanist project that is, realistically, already in place in popular culture: the transformations of technology, and, in fact, classical “literature.” Here the material is not something that is to be opposed to language, rather language itself continues to be one mode in which it must be thought reflexively. Accordingly, in each of the three sections and ideological clusters I address (Dialogism, Americanism, Modernism), the categories bear a certain exemplary interpretive burden. “Dialogism” as appropriated by American Bakhtinians for a neo-conservative humanist and inter-subjective model is exposed as a misappropriation that has led to the evisceration of “Bakhtin” on the critical scene. This gives way to a more properly agonistic, apostrophic, triadic, self-cancelling, and post-humanist model that leads from “voice” to the problem of inscription, anteriority, the dead word, allegory, and memory; the Americanist ideology of the self (as represented, in part, by neo-pragmatism) is exposed as antithetical to the “classic” texts it often rests upon, or means to contain. Similarly, modernism, treated as a contemporary trope re-invented to contain its pseudo-other, the “post-modern,” is evacuated by linguistic events it cannot conceptually account for in key texts. In each case, the problem of *prefigural* signifying agents – sound, signature, and letters – is mobilized to disempower a reigning ideology (a term I use, here, in a post-marxist sense as marking an inevitable and defensive meaning distortion, rather than as some sort of false consciousness).

What emerges in these essays – which the title of the second part, “Parables of exteriority” emblemizes – is that a different “politics” within alternate models of mimesis and new technologies of reading must be contemplated, and this in a way that renders the traditional opposition of the right and left increasingly secondary (as it is on the

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international scene as well). Rather, we are more frequently confronting an opposition *between* models of meaning or history that return to interiorizing premises (self-privileging, exclusionary, humanist) and models which implement some form of radical exteriority (post-humanist, social, linguistic) that close out the prior model and, indeed, the very opposition it rests on. This is not entirely charted terrain. Just as the rhetoric of some on the left and the right criss-cross here (the left's endorsing of nationalism against the eviscerations of late capitalism, for instance, also returns to the exclusionary and proto-fascistic logic which that entails), so a turn to the prospect of a more radical "materialism" that exceeds both and requires new categories is also posited (of the subject, gender, agency, and reading).

It is not, perhaps, accidental that the trope of the material returns with a certain urgency today across different projects – whether in the analysis of ideological anamorphosis in a late Lacanian idiom by Slavoj Žižek (see *The Sublime Object of Ideology* [New York: Verso, 1989]), or the retheorization of the fetish as a verbal figure by William Pietz ("The Problem of the Fetish I," *Res* 9 [Spring, 1985], 1–22), or Michael Taussig's Benjaminian allegorization of Latin American realities (*The Nervous System* [New York: Routledge, 1992]), or Judith Butler's post-feminist turn to the problem of "inscription" in theorizing gender. Since inscription is perceived as external or material (it might better be called "exscription"), it occupies a similar public space as does the social "other's word," say, of Bakhtin, which itself shades into what is called the (material) "alien" or "dead word" of anterior language or history. There is a corollary easily overlooked, then, between the social word and the idea of inscription itself. I explore this in the most public (and yet clearly inscribed) "dialogue" of Plato's, the *Protagoras*, which is both situated as if in the agora and encrypts in this publicness the most literal reading scene in Plato.

To ask, today, where the materiality of language functions as cultural intervention may be, necessarily, to reconvene the traditional form of "the reading" – only to introduce there the problem of the prefigural in general, and its havoc-wreaking effect on the inherited institutions of interpretation and iconography. In the following essays, the question of the prefigural – what I call, here, the "legs" of sense – operates actively to transform cultural icons: in the case of Bakhtin, it delivers us from an inter-subjective model; in that of Plato, from the way we "narrativize" his text and make him an icon of Platonism; in the case of Whitman, it delivers us from a historically

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installed domestication of the “voice.” The essays here inter-lace and network in ways hardly indicated by their general ordering: the pragmatism of Protagoras returns in the question of the pragma in American neo-pragmatism; the dialogism of Bakhtin is rewritten in the essay on Whitman; while the semiotic problem of the “sea” drifts between Conrad and Melville, as does the issue of signature. Moreover, the concept of pragma as (linguistic) “thing” that emerges in relation to Protagoras and launches a critique of American neo-pragmatism, returns in the discussion of Hitchcock as a revision of Žižek’s Lacanian use of “the Thing,” rewriting its pretense to a kind of epiphanic (if impossible) transparency as an event of inscription.

It is not accidental, then, that the figure of legs – the material order of the body or sign as reflected in the most persistent corporeal trope – persists throughout the texts analyzed. It is present not only in Cassio’s cut off leg in *Othello*, or the name of Conrad’s “secret sharer” Leggatt, but in Poe’s “foot d’or” and Hitchcock’s “thirty-nine steps.” I mean the term to be heard in the sense Derrida develops in essays like “Legs of Freud,” where the figure echoes with the ramifications of feet (hence rhythm), but also the law, legitimation, legacy (hence anteriority), and reading (*legere*). The feet or legs represent a prefigural moment in which the traces of anteriority conflate the material bearers of sense precedent to any metaphorization. They are the site not only of inscription, but also disinscription or re-inscription – what Donna Haraway terms a site for charting new pasts and futures. It is not accidental that a typical prefigural trope, prosopopeia, names a site of mimetic crisis: the emergence (and emergency) of the face and speaker, allowing us to reconvene the interlocking systems that produce that virtual reality, allowing us to reinscribe it otherwise. The figure of legs also dismantles any bodily metaphor that permits a master-slave opposition between the Cartesian head (subject, meaning, cognition) and the legs (material conveyors), since it frequently happens in these texts that the legs usurp the position of the head, or become severed and independent agents of transvaluation. If legs may be understood as a corporeal analogue for the material base of language itself, that entails the brute dependence of semantic relations on what precedes mimesis and figuration; on what, in the course of marking itself, gets woven into and alters meaning-production; on what seeks and implements *a mimesis without models*. If this trope stands in opposition to the (Cartesian) head in a classic binary of low and high, signifier and signified, matter and mind, its corollaries include animals (which carry

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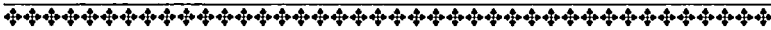
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interchangeable riders), slaves or servants in the social order (in Plato), machines of transport (Whitman's ferry, cars in Hitchcock). Legs is one term for a materiality that precedes figuration, that produces "figuration" as its evasion. The reader is asked to consider the direction of these readings, in the light of a different sort of pragmatism or materiality, much as the title "Anti-Mimesis" is not meant to be heard simply as a classic rejection or opposition to mimesis (with the classic of Auerbach echoing in the background), but rather to raise the prospect of other models of mimesis – and in particular, of addressing active forms of mimesis without models or copies.

Accordingly, my essay on Melville's "Bartleby" might be deemed representative for the entire volume. For in it I suppose that Melville's image of the narrator's Law Offices stands for a certain vision of the logos and mimesis itself – particularly as it depends on the production of copies based on originals. The questions to be asked as readers, then, are not only where the scrivener's dispossession of those Offices is effected, but how, as readers, we must follow that same gesture to perform the trajectory of Melville's text, and how this can entail an emptying out of the interiorizing model of a certain notion of the human (portrayed, in fact, as hellishly machinal and predictive)? In short, what alterations must occur in our model of reading itself, and hence "mimesis," to allow us to follow this historical transformation of signifying systems?

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PART I



Dialogue and inscription



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I

Othello, Bakhtin, and the death(s) of dialogue

'Tis the curse of service:
Preferment goes by letter

When *Othello* ends his final soliloquy with a dagger thrust to the throat, it is seldom noted how oddly his Venetian audience responds to this gesture. Rather than addressing the Moor's pathos-ridden end, they draw attention to what could be called the materiality of the speech itself. *Othello*'s soliloquy (he has been dictating an imaginary letter) concludes:

Set you down this;
And say besides, that in Aleppo once,
Where a malignant and a turban'd Turk
Beat a Venetian and traduc'd the state,
I took by th' throat the circumcised dog,
And smote him – thus. [*He stabs himself.*]
Lod. O bloody period!
Gra. All that is spoke is marr'd.

(5.2.351–8)

It is these last two remarks and their impact on reading *Othello*'s soliloquy and the problem of any suicide speech that I want to address. While Lodovico responds with astonishment to the act of suicide, he apostrophizes less that death than a deadly *punctuation* mark: "O bloody period!" He cannot stop himself from drawing attention to the speech itself, and to a completed sentence at that. Given the supposed impact of the thrust, it is almost mad. The grammatical metaphor acknowledges the facticity of Shakespeare's own writing, while the speaker registers amazement at *Othello*'s self-constructing oratory, just when its aesthetic effect collapses into transgressive blood and ruin. This may imply astonishment that death could emerge from the formal beauty of the verbal performance, but it definitely acknowledges a performance. Yet "period" can also mean a circuit, a *períodos* or going round, as if *Othello*'s reflexive self-murder tried to close