

PIVOTAL STUDIES IN THE GLOBAL
AMERICAN LITERARY IMAGINATION

Series Editors: Daniel T. O'Hara and
Donald Pease

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ON THE ETHICAL IMPERATIVES OF THE INTERREGNUM

Essays in Loving Strife
from Søren Kierkegaard
to Cornel West

William V. Spanos



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American Literary Imagination

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To the coming community

‘In *Loving Strife*, Spanos writes something like an intellectual autobiography in a series of essays, each of which revisits predecessors and contemporaries whose work has mattered in his life and career. All the more remarkable for the circumstances of their composition, these essays align an important intellectual’s sense of his engaged and creative inheritance with the modern minds that mattered most to his life and work.’

—Paul A. Bové, *Distinguished Professor, University of Pittsburgh, USA*

‘The history of ideas is sometimes viewed as an infinite conversation. In this book, William V. Spanos discloses the ways in which his own thinking has emerged from spirited conversations with others via a process he calls “a loving strife.” Reflecting on his encounters with ten ‘inaugural’ figures—from Søren Kierkegaard to Hannah Arendt, Edward Said, and Cornel West—Spanos provides a genealogy both of his own critical theory and the postnational world in which we live.’

—Robert T. Tally Jr., *Associate Professor of English, Texas State University, USA*

PREFACE

This volume of meditations on thinkers and poets whose works have, from the beginning of my career, influenced my criticism in a fundamental way had its origin in my dear friend Daniel O'Hara's invitation to contribute an autobiographical essay on Søren Kierkegaard for the series he is editing in behalf of the journal *Symploke* on earlier voices that instigated the revolutionary postmodern cultural initiative. The revelatory pleasure I experienced in the process of this welcomed genealogical endeavor was so great that I decided to extend the project to include nine other thinkers and poets who were crucial to the formation of my intellectual vocation: Martin Heidegger, T. S. Eliot, William Butler Yeats, Hannah Arendt, Edward Said, Robert Kroetsch, John Gardner, Robert Creeley, and Cornel West. In each case, the genealogical effort of retrieval (*Wiederholung*, "repetition," in Heidegger's terminology) reminded me not only of much about those inaugural origins that I had forgotten or come to take for granted over time. Far more important, it disclosed aspects of the meaning I had attributed to these enabling figures' influence that, unrecognized then, pointed proleptically to the theoretical local/global perspective I developed in my intellectual maturity, particularly during the tumultuous period between the Vietnam War and September 11th, 2001. This will become clear to anyone who is even minimally familiar with my criticism. Here in these brief prefatorial remarks I will simply point to a few of these proleptic insights into the *interregnum*, the liminal in-between world we inhabit, by which I mean specifically the waning of authority of the nation-state and the birth of a globally oriented coming community.

In the case of Søren Kierkegaard, what compelled my profound interest was his revolutionary rejection of the transcendentalism of the traditional Christian Church—the panoptic perspective that rendered its “faithful” subjects servants of a Higher Cause—in favor of a vocation that assigned the individual to his/her existential, that is, radically finite self. Equally important, it was the recognition that such an existential perspective was dependent on the need for a constant awareness of that easier transcendental domain that one had to give up to accept such an agonizing assignment to oneself.

In the case of Martin Heidegger, who, not incidentally, was a sympathetic reader of Kierkegaard, it was the revolutionary insight of this politically “conservative” thinker into the vocational imperatives of the modern Western version of democracy—the humanist secularism that was in fact a naturalized supernaturalism—that drew my explorative interest. To me, Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, as the binary of the title itself suggests, showed that since the Romans’ colonization of the errancy of Greek thinking, particularly in the last, anthropological (modern) phase of this “Roman” hegemony, thinking (and *poiesis*) has been a metaphysical thinking that sees time panoptically, from after or above (*meta*) things as they are (*physis*). That is, it is a perspective that spatializes or structures temporality and the differences it disseminates for the purpose of rendering their *errancy* stable, a condition that would enable modern man to reduce them to standing or disposable reserve—including himself, paradoxically. In this, I discovered, Heidegger anticipated the now pervasive contemporary theoretical insight that reads the modern world as one that has reduced politics to biopolitics and, in so doing, threatens to reduce human life to bare life, life, as Giorgio Agamben has more recently put it, that can be killed with impunity in the name of national security.

As for the poet, T.S. Eliot, another “conservative,” it was, like Kierkegaard’s thought, the dialogue between the transcendental and the finite domains, a dialogue that rendered these traditionally binary terms productively inoperative, that drew my attention to his writing. Eliot, I found, was not the Eliot of the New Critics, who read his poetry as the epitome of the worldless autotelism they espoused against the banality of modernity, but an Eliot who put his Christianity in an *Anseinandersetzung*, a loving strife, with the finite world that renders the prior binaries inoperative. That is to say, he was a writer whose poetry needs to be retrieved from the oblivion to which it has been relegated by the demise of the worldless New Criticism.

Similarly, I found in W. B. Yeats, another modern poet celebrated by the New Critics as an exponent of the worldless autotelic poem, a profound commitment to this finite world—and to the related cause of Irish independence from British colonial rule. This was not only the case with Yeats's late poems, where the celebration of the profane world is more apparent than in the earlier poetry; it is also the case with the poems emanating from his "System," the Phases of the Moon, which, in reading them contrapuntally—in terms of what they apparently suppressed—I found to be a device intended paradoxically to undermine the Modernist obsession with myth by rendering its violence against time inoperative. That is to say, Yeats invoked myth to celebrate humanity's irreparable finite life. This, I found by way of a closer reading than the close reading of the New Critics, was even true of "Sailing to Byzantium," the alleged autotelic poem *par excellence*, where the poet, in the very act of begging to be taken into the "artifice of eternity," celebrates the dying body to which he is inexorably attached.

The next chapter constitutes the curious but decisive genealogy of my affiliation with the thought of Hannah Arendt. It traces the origins of that affiliation back to the early 1980s, when, having given a series of lectures at some German universities on Heidegger arranged by the Nietzschean/Heideggerian philosopher David Farrell Krell, we had driven down to Todtnauberg in the Black Forest to visit the cabin where Heidegger did his late writing. There, as we talked about the play of shadow and light of the forest path so crucial to Heidegger's understanding of truth as *a-letheia* (unconcealment), Krell informed me of Heidegger's love affair with his young Jewish student Hannah Arendt, and that he had been allowed by Heidegger's wife to read the letters between the two that had been sequestered for a several generations. On that basis, David told me, in confidentiality, that the Heidegger who emerged in that longtime exchange would be other than the anti-Semitic Nazi he was then being portrayed to be. The knowledge of this intimate paradoxical relationship between a Jew and an alleged German Nazi instigated a powerful desire to know more about this Jewish woman. On returning to the US, therefore, I plunged into her writing and that of the scholars who were then analyzing it. By that time, Arendt had become an international figure thanks to some American scholars who, under the influence of Jürgen Habermas, were reading her as a universal political philosopher who focused on the Habermasian question of the *polis* as a matter of rational communicability. In reading these analytical accounts of Arendt's writing, I found, to my dismay, little

reference to her life as a Jewish refugee from Nazi Germany nor to her relationship to her mentor; this, despite the fact that she wrote a lot about the plight of the Jews, the question of their post-war status (Palestine), the bankruptcy of the Western nation-state system, and, not least, as exemplified by her controversial book on the trial of the Nazi functionary, Adolph Eichmann, in Jerusalem, the “banality of evil” that has come increasingly to characterize the thinking and language of Western modernity and its nation-state system. It was this scholarly suppression of Arendt’s fraught personal life, including her paradoxical affiliation with an ostensible Nazi, as this chapter points out, that instigated my will to put back into play—contrapuntally, as it were—these suppressed aspects of the life and works of Hannah Arendt.

I came to know the grace-filled work of Edward W. Said long before I came to know Hannah Arendt’s. It was in the early 1970s, when, following Robert Kroetsch’s and my founding of *boundary 2*, I invited him to contribute an essay to the first issue of the journal on the question of the postmodern. In the process, he informed me that he was a Palestinian student at Mount Hermon Preparatory School in Northfield, Massachusetts during the time, from 1951 to 1953, when I was teaching there; that though he had not taken a course with me, he, an alien Arab in a New England Puritan environment, admired me, a Greek-American, for my reputation among students as a rebel against the Mount Hermon Puritan work ethic. After that conversation, we became friends, a turn that led me to read his work avidly. What I found profoundly attractive about Said’s sensibility was the centrality of the exilic consciousness and the contrapuntal critical perspective that in-betweenness enabled: the impulse to put back into play the story—the Palestinians’, for example—that the dominant Western truth discourse repressed in order to articulate its own commanding narrative. Said’s exilic contrapuntal criticism, so much like that of Hannah Arendt’s “conscious pariahdom,” had a powerful and lasting effect on me. By way of its disclosive power I eventually became more a disciple of Said than of the Heidegger with whom I have been identified.

Unlike the preceding chapters, the next three constitute efforts to think the influence that two North American postmodern poets and a postmodern novelist had on my intellectual vocation: the late Robert Creeley; the late Robert Kroetsch, my coeditor of *boundary 2*; and John Gardner. It was Creeley, the quintessentially American poet, who introduced me to the term “occasion.” Though he was not conversant with the etymology (ultimately from *cadere*: to die), he deliberately used the word in the

dislocating sense that Wallace Stevens used it in the resonant line “Poetry is the cry of its occasion”: “Poetry,” he wrote, “is the measure of its occasion,” a poetry that emanates, not from above, but from below, from humanity’s existential encounter with the profane phenomena of the finite world. Only later, when I suddenly became conscious of the fact that I was using this resonant word consistently both in my teaching and writing, did I undertake a search into its etymological history. What I found, to my delight, was that “*occidere*,” the setting of the sun, an extension of *cadere*, is the Latin word from which the English word “Occident” (German “*Abendland*,” evening land) derives. Henceforth, this resonant ancient word became an indispensable term of my critical and theoretical vocabulary because it expresses so succinctly and resonantly the onto-political ground—the essence—of Western civilization, not least, its Orientalism, from its origins: when, that is, the West identified itself in a binary opposition to the Orient.

As for Bob Kroetsch, my Canadian SUNY-Binghamton colleague since 1967 and co-founding editor of *boundary 2*, the first journal to use the word postmodern in its title, he was my antithesis. He became a postmodern poet and novelist under my tutelage; I was a postmodern theoretician. He was responsive to the imperative of unending play inhering in an ontology grounded in the nothingness of being, or to put it alternatively, to the primacy of potential over the Act. I, despite my theoretical commitment to errancy, tended at the time to minimize that play in favor of conveying an urgent message. His poetry and fiction minimized the political implications of the postmodern or post-metaphysical turn. I overdetermined the political. In the process of our coeditorship of *boundary 2*, however, and in keeping with the genealogical meaning of “occasion” and the liminal interregnum in which we lived, we developed a unique form of dialogue. It was, again, a loving strife—*Auseinandersetzung*, in Heidegger’s vocabulary—in which the traditional meanings of the opposing binarist identitarian terms lost their dominance (the imperative of war to the end) and were transformed into an intimate relationality—“affiliation,” in Said’s language—that enhanced rather than effaced their now identityless identities. This loving strife, I would like to think, became the hallmark of the journal we founded and co-edited until Kroetsch repatriated to Alberta, the prairie homeland from which he had departed a decade or so before.

The next to the last chapter attempts to provide some semblance of my complex and often volatile relation to the great American novelist John Gardner, who became my Binghamton English Department colleague for

two all too brief years between 1980 and 1982. At first John and I kept our distance. This was because I had found his criticism of American postmodern fiction in *On Moral Fiction* perverse—Apollonian, I called it—and he had found my commitment to postmodernism equally perverse. But because our young wives, Liz Rosenberg and Susan Strehle, became close friends, we were thrown together whether we liked it or not. This took the form of weekend visits to their haunted farmhouse in Susquehanna, Pennsylvania, immediately south of the New York State border. It was during those visits that the initial distance between us collapsed into a close friendship, one characterized by a loving strife in which the previous binarist labels—Apollo/Dionysus, Modernist/Postmodernist—no longer applied. What was especially revelatory to me was, in fact, how deep I found that ambiguity—that spectral haunting by the Dionysian element of his Apollonian bent—to lie in John's very being. It came as a pleasant surprise to find, on reading *Mickelsson's Ghosts* after his horrific death in a motorcycle accident between Susquehanna and Binghamton, that this Dionysian haunting of the Apollonian, epitomized by the transition from the enlightenment world of Binghamton University to the dark and foreboding world of Susquehanna, had become the supreme theme of that last, and to me greatest, of his novels.

Last but not least, I write about my long-standing friendship with the great Black American philosopher activist, Cornel West, whom I met at a conference on the “hermeneutic crisis” he organized in 1979 when he was teaching at Union Theological Seminary. That occasion—particularly our discussion about the viability of a relationship between Union's revolutionary “liberation theology” and the postmodernist editorial policy of *boundary 2*—led to my inviting Cornel to join the editorial board of the journal, which, in turn, provided us relatively frequent opportunities to continue the dialogue that began at that conference. What I found deeply attractive about Cornel West was his deliberate rejection of the neutral academic persona in favor of an engaged—interested—writing and teaching that emanated from his Black American heart and the abhorrent conditions the people he represented suffered. His insistent refusal to separate America's war in Vietnam and the plight of Black Americans was, for example, to me, always a reenergizing reminder of my own commitment to the idea that the being of Being (*Sein*) constituted a continuum from the ontological to the more worldly cultural and political sites: a commitment I often forgot in overdetermining the Heideggerian critique of metaphysics in my discussion of the contemporary occasion. I also loved Cornel's appeal to popular Black American culture, particularly to Jazz and Soul. These

were not appendages; they were integrally related to his sense of human being. Indeed, this last chapter focuses on an occasion in which I and a few other *boundary 2* editors bore rapt—to me, epiphanic—witness to “Brother Corn’s” singing along with Marvin Gaye’s unforgettable song about the Black-Americans’ response to the Vietnam War. It was that occasion, as I say in this opening concluding chapter, that compelled me to think that he, unlike so many American intellectuals and artists, was gifted with grace.

All these inaugural figures, with the exception of Cornel West, are now dead. But my purpose in the following genealogical meditations, as I think it will be realized, has not been to monumentalize them. Such a fixing of their being would indeed be the kiss of death. Rather, it is to remind the world that the revolutionary kind of thinking and *poiesis* in which these inaugural thinkers and literary artists were engaged was, insofar as it was “grounded” in the nothingness of being—and the beginning which had no end—always already new. In other words, my purpose is to remind the reader that these intellectuals and artists inaugurated an indissoluble relay of de-structuring gestures epitomized by the five key phrases that, not accidentally, have emerged incrementally but in a decisive way in the process of these errant meditations as the harbingers of an urgently needed new language to replace that modern positivist language that ends in the “banality of evil”: (1) the *occasion* that (2) renders the measure of the binary logic of the Occidental tradition *inoperative*, and thus (3) calls for a comportment to the secular world that *revokes every vocation* to a Transcendental Cause; and (4) a dialogic affiliation between *all* humans, now acknowledged as identity-less identities (non-human humans), who dwell on this irreparable earth in *loving strife*, and, as such, (5) exist as the ontological precursors—the “ground zero”—of the “*coming polis*” that will replace the war to the end intrinsic to the Western nation-state.

Coda: A Note on the Genealogy of My Style:

The complexity of my writing style has often been noted by commentators on my scholarly and critical work. That “complexity” is no accident. It has been fundamental to my way of thinking from the beginning of my career. It had its origins, as I suggest in this book, when I was an undergraduate, in my encounter with Martin Heidegger’s inaugural destructive hermeneutics (*Destruktion*) in *Being and Time*, which revealed the hegemonic truth discourse of the Western (ontotheological) tradition, particularly of its modern anthropological phase, to be a lie. I mean, to put it positively, his disclosure

of a different and more original understanding of truth from that which, in privileging the Answer over the question, the Act over potential, renders thinking “thinking *about*,” that is, calculative: an apparatus of capture that coerces the complex differential phenomena of temporal being into simple usable structures and ultimately into standing or disposable reserve.

Still dislocated by the horrific Allied firebombing of Dresden I experienced a few years earlier as a prisoner of war in Nazi Germany, my first encounter with Heidegger’s *Being and Time* was a shock of recognition. I realized that the Truth I was being inscribed by in my schooling was an end-oriented mode of thinking, the imperative of simplicity of which was utterly inadequate to the worldly conditions of the interregnum: that post-war liminal occasion that had disclosed the violence endemic to the “benign” disinterested logic of the West. Heidegger called the alternative truth he was intuiting by way of retrieving temporality from the oblivion to which the dominant spatializing mode had relegated it the truth of “dis-closure” (Greek *a-letheia*) and the mode of thinking/language that was its imperative “destructive-projective.” At first, I referred to my verbal enactment of this alternative destructive-projective complex as “poetic.” But it was not long before I realized that even Western poetry had been infected by the virus of closure. As a result—and to underscore the revolutionary character of the rupture (Nietzsche called it doing philosophy with a hammer)—I came eventually—and increasingly—as it will be observed in the chapters that follow, to call it “errancy”: an explorative, de-structive-projective mode of thinking and saying that released potentiality from its centuries-old bondage to the Act, the question to the Answer, beginning to End, time to Space.

All of which, to repeat, is to say that the *errancy* of my writing style is no accident, the consequence of indifference. (I am aware of the paradox of this assertion.) It is, at its best, the linguistic imperative of a deliberate way of thinking that had its origins in the liminal ashes of Dresden—“the Florence of the Elbe”—and its articulation of its potential in the interrogation of the discourse of Western modernity inaugurated by Nietzsche and Heidegger and Arendt and by the post-modernist theoreticians who radicalized their revolutionary retrieval of the forgotten question of the being of Being.

The difference between the writing in this latest book and that of my earlier ones is a matter of the degree of my consciousness of the complex ethical and linguistic imperatives of my destructive hermeneutics. In the earlier works I took the complexity of my writing for granted. Here, at the terminal point of my intellectual life, I have, in the spirit of the late Edward W. Said’s last writings, honed it into my late style.

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I am grateful to Daniel O'Hara and Donald Pease for encouraging me to undertake this small book on ten thinkers, poets, and novelists who contributed to the making of my intellectual vocation. Their invitation not only enabled me at this late date in my life to return to my beginning, but also, in T.S. Eliot's resonant words, "to know it for the first time." I hope my genealogical explorations contribute in a significant way to the pivotal series they are editing for Palgrave Macmillan.

On a more personal register, I wish once again to express my abiding gratitude to Susan Strehle for her inexhaustible care at a time when I need it most; to our son Adam, who has constantly reminded me of what I have forgotten in the pursuit of a dimming past; and to my other three children from a previous marriage, Maria, Stephania, and Aristides, for their abiding presence in my life. Not least, I want to thank my recent students, Guy Risko, Mahmoud Zidan, James Fitz Gerald, and Robert Wilson, who have labored in my behalf above and beyond the call of duty. They are the precursors of the coming community that the following erratic meditation struggles to imagine.