

Poetry against *Torture*

Criticism, History, and the Human

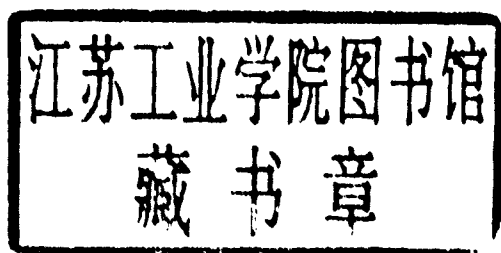
Paul A. Bové



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香港大學出版社

HONG KONG UNIVERSITY PRESS



Hong Kong University Press

14/F Hing Wai Centre

7 Tin Wan Praya Road

Aberdeen

Hong Kong

© Hong Kong University Press 2008

ISBN 978-962-209-926-5 (Hardback)

ISBN 978-962-209-927-2 (Paperback)

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Secure On-line Ordering

<http://www.hkupress.org>

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue copy for this book is available from the British Library

Printed and bound by Liang Yu Printing Factory Co. Ltd., in Hong Kong, China



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— Britta Erickson, *The Art of Xu Bing*

Acknowledgements

I want to thank Professor Q.S. Tong of the English Department of the University of Hong Kong for initiating the processes that allowed me to deliver these lectures over the course of several weeks during February and March, 2006. At every moment, he has been a friend, an interlocutor, and a guide who made my time in Hong Kong pleasurable and challenging. His constant care and generous talk embody the virtues of a great character and a long and life-enhancing culture.

Thanks also go to Professor Kam Louie, Dean of the Faculty of Arts, who made possible my visit and who shared his time and insights with me about education in Hong Kong and China.

The English Department of the University provided me with a fine place to work, with students to meet, and a collegial context for the exchange of ideas that I thought rare for its combination of excellence and comradery. I thank them for allowing me to join their weekly seminars and to share some of my thoughts on John Milton in America. The staff of the department facilitated all my activities and I want to thank them heartily.

Among the many excellent friends I made in Hong Kong, special thanks must go to Chris Hutton, who was Head of Department while I was there, and made me feel welcome beyond all reasonable need. Bill Ashcroft shared his experiences of Hong Kong and Australia with me; I was pleased to hear two of his talks while there. Elaine Yee Lin Ho and Douglas Kerr define the professional, historical, and social spirit of Hong Kong and embody the best of cosmopolitanism among academics. To all the others who gave so generously of their time and custom, I say thanks.

Ms. Julia Chan acted as my research assistant in Hong Kong and she more often than not ably guided me through all the differences between the University of Hong Kong and American universities. We had innumerable valuable

conversations about Hong Kong culture and her research into postmodern fiction. I miss those times even now.

Ms. Ruth Hung, a graduate of the University of Hong Kong and doctoral student at Oxford, shared her knowledge of the city and Chinese intellectuals. I learned a great deal.

Finally, I must acknowledge the post-graduate students of the University who listened to me talk, who posed hard questions, and who often met informally with me during our Monday discussions. They were a new and shaping audience for me.

As always, I must express the deepest intellectual debt to my editorial colleagues at *boundary 2*, who create an environment of debate, learning, and criticism that I believe is unique. Q.S. Tong and I talked a very great deal in Hong Kong about what I was doing, about what criticism now needs to do, and about the difficult importance of U.S./China exchanges that rest on testimony of how the world looks from different places. He taught me a great deal about Chinese poetry, painting, and calligraphy that form part of the background of these pages. At the same time, being the excellent scholar of nineteenth-century Britain that he is, he saved me from an embarrassment or two about Ruskin and Keats.

Several other members of the *boundary 2* group offered me specific advice and I want to acknowledge them and apologize for taking their advice less often than I should. Joseph Buttigieg, Marcia Landy, Ronald Judy, and Dan O'Hara read lectures in various forms. Chris Connery, Wlad Godzich, and Rob Wilson allowed me to repeat the Empson materials at the University of California, Santa Cruz. That context taught me a great deal. Lindsay Waters also read the Empson materials and encouraged me to continue. Special thanks to Bruce Robbins who helped me decide on the final title for these talks. Many of the others not named here have been interlocutors for varying lengths of time. For example, while I have admired and worked with Jonathan Arac for three decades, I have come to know Tony Bogues more recently. But with all the other distinguished members of this unique collective — Don Pease, Michael Hays, Gayatri Spivak, Hortense Spillers, Aamir Mufti, and especially William Spanos — they create a density of argument and thought that nourishes and trains. Readers will feel the undying presence of Edward W. Said's honorable passion, well-chosen erudition, and path-breaking illumination throughout these pages.

Special thanks to N. John Cooper, Dean of the School of Arts and Sciences, University of Pittsburgh, who made it possible for me to be away for nine weeks during the school year. Thanks, too, to Professor David Bartholomae, Chair of

English at Pitt, who facilitated the arrangements. This is the time to express deep admiration for Dave's skills and generosity as chair as well as for his personal support. A special thanks to Professor Eric O. Clarke, a *boundary 2* as well as Pittsburgh colleague, who shared a seminar with me in the spring of 2006.

I wish to thank my friend and colleague, Meg Havran, whose generosity and skill deserve the greatest recognition. Joshua Schriftman helped me with preparing this manuscript and correcting proofs.

My doctoral students at Pittsburgh have no direct experience of these talks, but their imprint is everywhere in them. If I have a ruling motive for writing these lectures, it is to try to serve their interests in whatever way is possible — while listening as much as possible to know what their needs are and to discover the truths they share.

Carol and Laura Mastrangelo Bové supported me throughout. They made it possible for me to leave home for more than two months and they offered considerable support and love at a distance. They have tolerated my distraction in rewriting these pages over the last months. Laura provides the inspiration of a young intellectual forming herself with a commitment to thought and justice. Carol, as always, encourages me to do only what I think important, to simplify my commitments to those that matter, and to keep my prose accessible. I would get nothing done without the frisson of our endless talk about fundamental matters.

Preface

This book would never have been written had I not been honored with an invitation to lecture at the University of Hong Kong on Foundations of Euro-American Critical Theory. In searching about for a way to approach this intimidating topic, it seemed to me imperative that I couple two lines of approach, or if you will, adopt two congruent subjects. I had to choose a starting point that would set me along a path through the vast body of writing, culture, and thinking that lay about me as the field for my work. In so doing, I had to admit that I was choosing because of what I thought was best in forming modern critical practice rather than merely the theoretical aspects of the field. The field of criticism lays there crisscrossed so densely by all the same forces and creations of Western history as any other field of cultural knowledge, that to write the story of its foundations and their emergence would be an impossible task if I were to try to be complete and exhaustive.

As I expected, my topic grew before me and I soon realized that I was in the position of a Beckett character, crawling on a well-known terrain that nonetheless surprises, bogs one down, and demands constant attention. I knew that I would be speaking in what had been until recently a colonial institution where the British models of teaching and the British narratives of literary criticism and history were dominant. I knew I faced an unusual and provocative opportunity as an American in such a context. I was not only an avatar of the current imperial power and so could speak, presumably, from a universal rather than parochial position, but also I would be speaking inside one of the privileged portals of communication and exchange between the United States and China. Since Deng Xiaoping re-opened China, many Western intellectuals, bearing the marks of cultural as well as political capital, carrying the skills and techniques of modern literary and cultural study, have found chances to travel, speak, and publish

within both China and a Hong Kong newly redefined as a Special Administrative Region according to the One-Country / Two-Systems policy.

No self-aware American critic, no critic from anywhere at any time, can easily let pass the difficulties of such a situation of exchange and displacement. Wanting very much not to offer mere material or technique for appropriation and imitation by students and younger colleagues, I hoped rather to present a narrative of Western criticism that made the practices of that discipline transparently available as a regime of human life rather than as either a disciplinary formation or a business-like profession. In the figure of Stanley Fish and his lesser avatars, these two collapse into one.

As an American speaking guest, I hoped to make use of what I knew would be my audience's thorough knowledge of the English traditions. I wanted to align them with certain European-wide and American practices in part to denigrate the Englishness of colonial residue — as we find it, for example, in the practices of Practical Criticism — and the professionalism of newer jargons and alignments — including postcolonialism and multiculturalism. These last are, after all, very much residues of imperial power and practice and often their repetition. As I said frequently to my hosts, I hoped for the time when we might all speak of criticism with a common sense of its general qualities shaped by and aimed at the particular, regional, and international realities in which they sit.

To this end, it seemed best to test the case for historicism and its philological humanistic alliances with the primacy of poetry. Therefore, I begin with Vico and some of his sources and move through an unusual set of figures, some like Auerbach and Said clearly in his tradition, others like Mill and Foucault, who are not. I want to press the possibilities of rethinking the historicist humanists' discovery that history and not nature defines the species, that is, in the sense of Marx's great formula, that the human makes not only history but in the process makes itself as the historical species, as the species of history. This brought me to the position of arguing against what an audience member once called "pure literary criticism," by which she meant some echo of Practical Criticism that aimed at an ahistorical and apolitical demonstration of textual meaning and form. This residue of colonial British power aligns with a much more American form of emerging global mediocrity, that is, an historical and social disinterestedness that masks itself as professionalism. Positively, I show that criticism cannot be but as an engaged form of human will and action, learned in all the ways that philology once romanticized — or nearly so — and aware of its obligation to enable and support poesis as the general capacity of human cultural production as a means of and place for human completion of its own potential. In terms of

war, which seems to come so easily to my tongue these days, criticism is both shield and spear, and those who would deny those uses are not critics.

Edward W. Said stands out as the great model for literary humanists in the struggle to reassert criticism's deepest and broadest political and cultural responsibilities. Those who know Said's work (and mine) will recognize the depth of his influence on these lectures, both in their commitment to historical humanism and a certain idea of the engaged critical intellectual. Moreover, such readers will recognize that I try to develop specific lines of thought that Said set in motion. For example, late in his career, Said elaborated a notion of culture as contrapuntal, which was his way of noting that culture does not yield to reductive analysis. He also argued that what he called "the politics of blame" had no monopoly on virtue. As strong a critic as he was of European colonialism and Orientalism, Said nonetheless appreciated and traced the complex contributions to human history, knowledge, and thinking that occurred within those reprehensible practices. Said would never have rested in a postcolonialist dismissal of the great nineteenth-century British intellectuals, condemning, for example, the Dickens of *Great Expectations* for its "unelaborated" treatment of Australia and its colonial relation to the U.K. Rather, Said took such texts for what work they did and might still do, opening them (and us) to historical awareness of their role in the creation as well as reflection of an imperial system that saturated British culture. Nevertheless, he did these things while at the same time recognizing and extending critically Dickens's contributions to the aesthetic modes of displaying the situation of the human and its potential. In a similar way, I engage here with John Stuart Mill, setting aside, for the moment, the postcolonial critical analysis of him as a colonialist, a chauvinist, and an implicit racist. I concede from the beginning the horrible truth of Mill's limitations not to dismiss, forgive, or forget them, but to explore other questions that a postcolonial indictment might disallow. For example, I use Mill to ask how essential classical liberalism is or was to the developments of historical humanism as they emerged from the European Renaissance. I do this, in part, because the advantages of liberal societies based on which the critique of liberalism is often launched are under attack both in the North Atlantic world and elsewhere in Asia and parts of the developing world. I insist that a form of appreciation of historical humanism obliges a serious look at liberal society's values and institutions if ever the dream to transcend their limits is to emerge in material forms.

I also follow Said in standing against the quietism of certain kinds of professionalism and "specialization." Said's objections to specialists' influence

is commonplace at first sight — it preempts the desires and wisdom of all others and derives from self-legitimizing institutions and discourses — but develops into an important element in his thinking about criticism and the civic role of the critic, which in retrospect approximates a classical, almost Ciceronian, view. I consider his passionate but witty and relentless criticism of Yasser Arafat and Samuel Huntington to be paradigms of how critics, motivated by love, a sense of responsibility for the species' future, and a loathing of injustice, should resist the arrogance of power and the ignominy of self-indulgence. Academic professionals who practice their own specialties merely within those self-legitimizing systems and structures do not deserve the name "critic," except by circumstance. As Said argued about American-style deconstruction in the late 1970s, such practitioners become so absorbed in the importance of their own acts and judgments that they misplace their visions of themselves and things for views of the world. Famously, Said asked of deconstruction, what if a Martian came to earth, hearing all the talk of revolutionary overthrow of capital, phallogocentrism, metaphysics, and so on — what if that Martian looked around and asked, "What has changed? Has the state fallen? Has tyranny ended?"¹

In contrast to Said's engaged critical humanism, Stanley Fish's free-market² professionalism has set the tone for many who came out of and after this period. I insist here that these matters concern not only U.S.-based academic professionals, but in part because of U.S. prominence and the power of certain discursive practices, academics spread throughout the world where certain modes of professional practice have standing. Arguing against Said's criticisms, Fish insists that even the critique of professionalism is a form of professionalism and so advocated a kind of careerist honesty, represented nicely by Fish's own simultaneous investment in law school teaching and academic administration and now the blogosphere. Reviewing the Said/Fish exchanges of the 1970s and their career paths and status, we find things of great interest. I contend, sadly, that Fish has won the debate by historical outcome.

Of course, Edward W. Said is a much more prominent intellectual internationally than Fish. Reviewing Google's data on searches makes that very clear.³ My arguments rest on the perception that Fish is merely a figure around whom unfortunate elements in tradition and current practice in advanced academic work coalesce. I am concerned with issues and problems present in the Western critical tradition and, as the long readings of the Italian, Vico, and the Englishman, Mill indicate, the traditions I am surveying and judging have origins and consequences outside the United States. To suggest that my perspective is too much U.S.-focused is to neglect the comparative range of these lectures and to

ignore the importance of U.S. practice in a world where, for better or worse, the United States and English, to say nothing of American universities, are dominant forces.

The other topic that might seem to some to be of mostly U.S. interest, that is, torture, is certainly not and only a most provincial reader would deny both the unfortunately large number of torturers there are in the world and the ill effects of the American Republic's unfortunate association with torture on the progress of political modernization. Furthermore, I intend to show that it matters profoundly that Western culture and criticism have developed in such a way as to suggest inseparability between the outcome of poetry as of a work of the human subject and of torture upon the body and so subjectivity, itself. Indeed, I claim that the forces that engage themselves in torture, that legitimate it, and that derive its effectiveness from science stand in diametric opposition to those that understand how human work in poetics produces an organized subjectivity that can itself allow the species to fulfill its capacities as historical, as self-made, and as guided by a desire for perfection.

I am not the first person to discuss the horrible effects of U.S. involvement in torture since the events of September 11. Nor am I the first to recognize that there are global implications to such horrors as Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay. I am certainly not the first literary critic to attend to torture. I might be, however, the first to contend that poesis is the counterpoint to torture and that there are deep civilizational and species implications in the choice of power for torture over and against poesis as the unique human ability to make history according to humanity's best potential for subject creation. I hope to show that there are conflicts between historicist and analytic traditions of thinking in the modern Western world and that from the ahistorical, anti-literary tradition of analysis, it is much harder to muster opposition to torture or to see the horrors of torture as a special form of modernity's capacity for human self-destruction and, indeed, even eco-destruction. This last set of claims these pages present provocatively since lectures do not provide, or demand, the thorough demonstration associated with thesis-length examination of such large historical problems. Arendt's great book on totalitarianism stands out as a model for the examination of such topics and claims, but these lectures do not afford the chance for that kind of work.

Critics of American foreign and police policies, especially since the coming of the George W. Bush regime, have written thousands of pages attacking or defending the use of severe interrogation methods in poor areas of American cities and in the so-called "war on terror." These lectures do not take those policies or books as their immediate subject. Among all the materials that I know

on recent applications of torture by the U.S. government and some of its often-unacknowledged allies in this enterprise, none see in it quite the same world historical point as I. In a most apposite irony, I contend that the application of terror and the development of legal, political, and indeed moral arguments in its defense, especially in its defense as a necessary bulwark to buttress Western civilization, demonstrate intensely the necessity to embrace and develop the modern projects of secular historical humanism. It is this last point that also leads me to warn scholars and students to withhold support from, to resist the allure of, analytically based critique as a norm for critical practice. I try to expose both the alliances among various practitioners of critical analysis, such as Bacon and Descartes, and the quite important negative consequences of withdrawing critical humanism from prominence, indeed, from dominance in culture, with effects that make the resistance to torture and all the barbarism it implies more difficult. Put simply, those scholars who embrace the tradition of philosophical analysis as the basis for professional academic “literary” study fail to advance the civilizing processes of historical humanism and stand less well-armed than need be in the face of the torture question. This last makes clear as possible the need to embrace the historical humanist project both as its own species task in “perfecting” culture and society and as the proper measure of torture’s barbarism. Those who support torture should learn the species cost of their barbaric politics and thinking.

I hope that my readers will be as charitable as my audiences have been and not believe that because I have not spoken directly about certain topics or movements I am unaware of them or have not considered them. I am sure that some readers will descry what I have done here as either too Western — I remind them of the assigned topic — or as showing no sign of current global realities or awareness of academic debates. Of course, it is possible to make other choices in working through these materials and indeed one could choose entirely different sets of topics, authors, and texts. I offer these merely as a record of one attempt, at one place, in one time. I hope that they have some value for the future, as they seemed to have when overly polite audiences listened for what must have seemed at times like forever.

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1

Vico and Philological Criticism

Those who occupy the heights of power yearn for the immense and the infinite.

— Giambattista Vico, *On the Study Methods of Our Time*

Beginning in 1699, the Neapolitan thinker and critic, Giambattista Vico, opened each academic year at the University of Naples with an “Inaugural Oration” delivered on October 18, the Feast Day of St. Luke. As Professor of Rhetoric, it was his job to introduce new university students to the nature, aims, and traditions of education while at the same time elaborating his own ever-deepening sense of its components, purposes, and ideals.

His speech of 1708 was special for several reasons and in many ways. It was lengthier, more formal, and more elaborate because he aimed it not only at his students but also directly to those in power. In 1707, as part of the Europe-wide “War of Spanish Succession” (1701–14), Austria had driven Spain from control of Naples — a mark of the Spanish Empire’s decline — and the University’s administration had decided to dedicate the opening academic ceremonies of 1708 to the new imperial ruler. Vico delivered his lecture, *On the Study Methods of Our Time*, before the Austrian Emperor’s representative who embodied the all too secular competition between Joseph I and the Vatican. The Austrian Viceroy and Captain General of Naples was Vincenzo Cardinal Grimani, whom Pope Clement XI considered excommunicating for representing the Habsburgs’ interests with too much enthusiasm.¹ Keeping this setting in mind steadies our sense of Vico’s political interests in this lecture that is so evidently concerned with educational theory and human anthropology. Vico laid out for the city’s political as well as intellectual and academic elites a daring and expansive prospect of the pedagogic and civil purposes of intellectual method within the university and the city to which it belonged.²

Nearly three hundred years later, faced with the welcome opportunity to speak under the auspices of the Faculty of Arts to an audience including post-graduates whose auditing credits them with study in method, I start a series of lectures by invoking Vico's grand accomplishment. I do so not because we are older and wiser and more modern than he — that is, not to correct or admonish — but also not because we should or can only be his poor echo, merely an anxious shadow of his original greatness. I bring Vico before you to start this series of talks because he is an essential figure in supporting and elaborating the small cadre of loving intellectual workers who study criticism, poesis, and power hoping to make something permanent of humanity's historical potential. The cadre is small but impressive, including Plato, Machiavelli, Aristotle, and Bacon for Vico and, for us, as I will suggest in succeeding talks, Erich Auerbach, Edward Said, William Empson, and others.

Although Vico's great work is the final edition of *The New Science* (1744), an exceedingly original, inventive, and difficult expression of a lifetime's reflection on poetry, education, law, philosophy, and politics, I will speak mostly about the 1708 oration, *De nostri temporis studiorum ratione* (*On the Study Methods of Our Time*).³ I have two reasons for this choice: first, Vico's lecture is an excellent model and second, it anticipates a great deal of what follows in his career. With some additions and qualifications, we can maintain faith with his accomplishments.

All critical humanists must study Vico so they might decide if they will embrace not all the details of his program but the basic historical and aesthetic principles of his method and thinking. My aim is to encourage you to take him very seriously as an interlocutor in our collective work on and with literatures and literary cultures. I will contend throughout these lectures that literary humanists, scholars, and critics devoted to the *litterae humaniores* should think of themselves in ways that are now rather uncommon, unfashionable, and institutionally difficult to imagine and maintain. If we literary humanists do not know Vico well, we diminish our capacities and contribute to a cultural amnesia the effect of which is nothing less than barbarism. Vico himself and the tradition of work he exemplifies offer moral, intellectual, and political resources that our societies need and that, for the most part, academic professionals and their extramural contemporaries do not provide.

"Crisis" is a very overworked word in recent literary and cultural studies and its pervasiveness in the media's accounts of political and social events wears it thin. Cheapened language supports the dominant powers of the status quo, shielding them from suitable discussion, undermining the commonplaces, the topics, that thriving polities possess. Literary history suggests this has always

been the case, from Thucydides' description of linguistic decay during the plague years of *The Peloponnesian Wars* to Camus's echo of that trope in *La Peste*. Writing in 1929, Samuel Beckett gave us to understand that cheapened or as he put it when speaking of global English, "polite language," becomes available again with new force in its very putrefaction and, he adds, this is a perfectly Vichian insight.⁴

If the media and political speech have hollowed out this essential word, "crisis," which like so many other words we will discuss became common in English during the Renaissance, then not only academic careerist repetition but also more grievous Gnostic forms of intellection further its undermining. Historically, the very conditions and practice that damaged this word bring it back. The *Oxford English Dictionary* shows that usage confirms what Beckett understood, that "crisis" has now become a vacuous gesture of repetition that as a plain placeholder in people's speech more than ironically, viciously, creates the familiar: "now applied esp. to times of difficulty, insecurity, and suspense in politics or commerce." Merely historical consciousness notes this contextualized usage and proposes various analyses of its causes. Vichian historical humanism, however, not only contextualizes, conceptualizes, and "historicizes" — but it remembers and releases the results of human labor, the commonplaces, embedded in the material language we inherit and should preserve. What has died in the anti-human, historical reading can recover, aiming to preserve not only past human work as a resource and tradition, but the very idea of the species as historically human. Beckett, speaking of the Vichian elements in Joyce's renewal of language, puts it this way: "There is an endless verbal germination, maturation, putrefaction, the cyclic dynamism of the intermediate. This reduction of various expressive media to their primitive economic directness, and the fusion of these primal essences into an assimilated medium for the exteriorization of thought, is pure Vico, and Vico, applied to the problem of style."⁵

We will return to the question of style at several points in these lectures, especially when we approach Vico's heir, Erich Auerbach's reading of Dante. For now, we follow Beckett's Joycean and Vichian authority to recover "crisis" for our usage, not only about our moment, but for the entire set of threats that Vico's work helps us see confront not only humanistic historicism but criticism and so our cultural polities, themselves. From the putrefaction of media and academic abuse, we dare to call the need societies and academic humanists face "critical," to designate the present configuration of intellectual and political forces a life-threatening crux in the fate of the human and its productions. Just what this threat is we can only begin to say until we follow Vico through his

analyses. It involves the alignment of anti-humanistic, indeed Gnostic intellectual ambitions, with now common political authoritarianism that increasingly relies upon not only capital investment in new forms of corporatism, but persistent transformations in the nature and function of knowledge, and especially their effects upon education.

I find myself using the term “Gnostic” in this Vichian context in a way similar to Slavoj Žižek in an interview, “On Divine Self-Limitation and Revolutionary Love,” from 2004.⁶ Žižek’s remarks work as a criticism of the contemporary heir to Desartes, Alain Badiou, and I allude to them here precisely for that reason. In substance, Žižek and I agree on what we mean by Gnosticism but we part ways over its value. Žižek fits his own anti-humanism and anti-historicism into an anti-secularism that warns against conceiving of the Western God of Jewish and Christian monotheism anthropocentrically.

Žižek embraces a kind of weak Gnosticism that, setting aside for the moment his claim of its Jewish origins, repeatedly appears in habits of mind that typify modern philosophy and physical science. We will see the second of these points later when we touch on remarks by great physicists. The Gnostic habit of mind is, however, much more pervasive in the humanities than it should be, common even among those who have little idea of its persistence in their work. In the Vichian context, not only do ancient thinkers such as the Stoics and moderns like Descartes and his heirs fall within this practice, but so do the many intellectuals who have faith in various sorts of anti-historicist practices to liberate us from the fallen ruined time of political limits.

Žižek states the matter simply at first: “The basic message of religion, to put it in a nutshell, is that humanity cannot stand on its own.” A good Baconian, Žižek expresses his admiration for what he calls “Jewish iconoclasm,” which he insists is not antagonistic to Christianity. Indeed, iconoclastic destructions of anthropocentrism find their fulfillment, he contends, in Christianity. Žižek’s thinking has about it, though, a strange residue of perhaps Kierkegaardian meditation. His iconoclasm morphs into a familiar Protestant Incarnationalism so habitual and assuring, one presumes, as to be at home now in the Vatican. “Images of God,” he writes, are not proscribed “because God is *tout autre*, beyond, and every image betrays him, but because the space of the divine is not up there, it’s here, in human interactions, and I think this is perhaps only brought to a conclusion in Christianity.”

Žižek recognizes at least one danger on the surface of his position, Gnosticism. He insists his pose only approaches Gnosticism, a fact that interests me much less than his definition of the Gnostic and his rather extraordinary naïveté that denial does not reveal truth.