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the answer to last week's puzzler

METALEPSIS SEMINARIANS, 9-ERS, AUXILIARY MEMBERS, and OCCASIONAL GUESTS

A recently released short essay by Sir Isaiah Berlin, the Russian-British polymath, concluded that the 20th century was, in comparison to all others, surpassingly brutal. Berlin put the blame squarely, if unexpectedly, on idealism and, in particular, philosophical idealism. "The idea that to all genuine questions there can be only one true answer is a very old philosophical notion. The great Athenian philosophers, Jews and Christians, the thinkers of the Renaissance and the Paris of Louis XIV, the French radical reformers of the eighteenth century, the revolutionaries of the nineteenth—however much they differed about what the answer was or how to discover it (and bloody wars were fought over this)—were all convinced that they knew the answer, and that only human vice and stupidity could obstruct its realization." Behind every positive idea is a negative antipode: idealism hates realism, primitivism detests civilization, phenomenology just can't stand positivism. This "you say tom-ay-to I say to-mah-to" strategy uses binary logic to create middle positions that move from nasty to nice in a series of steps. But, as we all know, perfection is a rarely achieved goal, and binary opposition is bi-polar as a mental pathology as well as in its political and social sense. Intellectual life is thus, also, inescapably a political life where the nightmare of polarity must be avoided, even though it appears in the guise of utopian ideals.

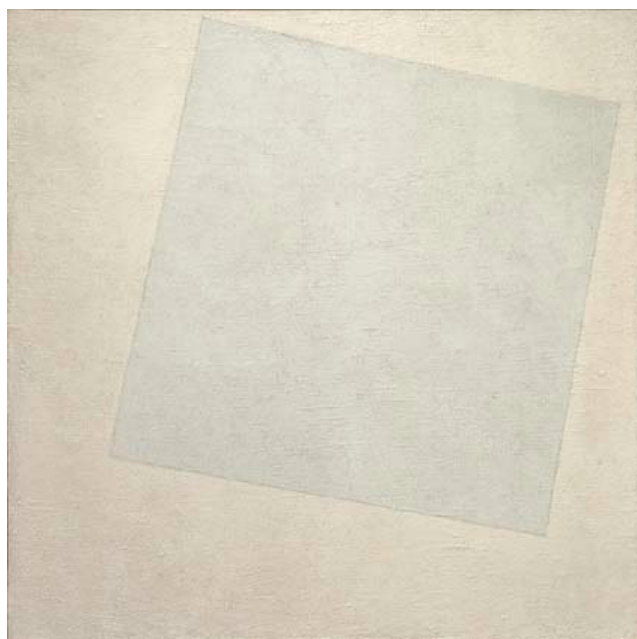


Sir Isaiah Berlin (D. Levine)

* ideological causes and the occultation cure

Berlin's essay, "[A Message to the 21st Century](#)," is both chilling and energizing. On one hand, Berlin's century, the 20th, was a mess, a nightmare, an unimaginable horror. It surpassed all other centuries in the scale and extremity of violence, cruelty, and irrational evil. The kicker was that most of this nightmare was owed to the highest register of human culture: philosophy and the articulation of social and cultural ideals from the Enlightenment on. As Berlin puts it, without Kant's undoing of theology, Robespierre and others might have kept their heads. It's not philosopher *per se* that is evil, but the articulation of ideals in terms of opposition to ... well ... what opposes it. Freud would say that the ideal is articulated *precisely* because there is a primordial antipathy that we cannot otherwise express. The ideal, positively stated, is "really about" the abjected subaltern we just can't stand anymore. What better way to clean house than to put things in a positive way and devalue the opposition.

This is clearly the place to do a little "occultation critique." The binary signifier assumes something weird, and it remains to us simply to go back to this weirdness. In the case of the subject/object binary, for example, it is impossible to show that there is any objectivity completely devoid of the subjectivity that identifies and frames it. Equally, it is impossible to isolate subjectivity as an ideality devoid of carnal material objectivity. At every level and in every condition, what we imagine to be opposites mingle, merge, and conspire. There is no "pure case," no simple essence. Kasimir Malevich's *White on White* is a striking, unsettling demonstration of this.



Kasimir Malevich, *White on White*, 1918.

Berlin's "solution" to the mess of the 20c. is not relativism. Although he condemns positions that assume that there is one answer to all questions, he does not endorse the view that "any answer works." Any is just as bad as one. We have to take a Lacanian position on this! The issue is not *why* there are so many answers to questions, all in fierce competition with each other, but *what makes this multiplicity possible in the first place*. "Polysemy" is the Renaissance criticism word for the multiple meanings that can be born by a single work of art, text, or symbol. The point is not to find which of the many meanings generated by things is better or more authentic, but how polysemy functions, how it comes into being, and how it functions within subjectivity.

Polysemy is not just about the possibility of seeing things in different ways from different points of view. It is a critique of our subjective involvement in the *construction* of points of view — a process which involves not just a little of metonymy and occultation. One key text is Don Cameron Allen's book, *Mysteriously Meant* (1970).

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about blow-back. Yes, we want to be Kantians, Hegelians, Heideggerians to back up our reasoning, but do we ignore the negative heritage? This is increasingly difficult in the case of Heidegger, for example, where the recently released "Black Books" show that not only was Heidegger a Nazi, he was a "super-Nazi" critical of Hitler's failure to "see the job through." This doesn't negate Heidegger's philosophical genius; rather, it proves Berlin's point: that with every "positive fantasy" generated through reason there is a "negative fantasy" that is occulted. Only Hegel could be said to specifically address this with his ideas about sublation/*Aufhebung*. Absolute Reason for Hegel is not a position of "complete wisdom," trumping all other points of view. It is the willingness to abide with the sheer negativity of reason, its permanent defective nature. By "tarrying with the negative" we reach an Absolute that is a gap, a defect, a sheer in-between. This point is missed, and often by Hegelians themselves.

Occultation is what ideology *does*, so our critique should learn how to spot it and say how it works. This is the "occultation cure." I would say "de-occultation" but the point is not to affirm the positive metaphor of ideology, to get rid of occultation, but to show how occultation is a constitutive and active component within metaphor. The form of metaphor that corresponds to occultation is metonymy. Metonymy is typically defined as a relation of parts to the whole and/or other parts. This is not total crap but it is misleading. One popular crappy version in my view is the reference to the Vitruvian Man, whose parts are harmoniously combined in a beautiful body. Proportions of this body are dutifully transferred into architecture, and the schema of combining the circle and the square, an ancient problem, become a part of the esoteric lore of the whole.

I believe this returns us to the mask of metaphor in the illusion of cosmic whole — a New Age idea that becomes an alibi for not doing a rigorous critique. Metonymy is revealed by its role in metalepsis, where the rules of the frame are intentionally violated, bringing in the "negative paradox" of framing itself, demanding an account of the subject who is the content of the frame and also the maker of the frame. With metonymy, we cannot use occultation to get rid of what we cannot explain. We must "tarry with the negative." Metonymy is meaning created by absence, and occultation — absence — is all about metonymy. We don't have to use abstract concepts here. Things are occulted in direct, material, and historic ways. People are exiled or killed. Servants must use the servants' entrance. There are hidden parts of buildings, designs concealed within the literal content of paintings and novels. Occultation is not just a casual sport, it is a main-line business of arts, and also a key strategy of ideology in its projects of ethnic cleansing and public relations. Metaphor is the *elixir of love* that gets us to swallow the illusion of the cosmic whole. Tastes great, but it engenders thirst at the same time it pretends to satisfy our need for meaning.

Occultation provides the cases and sites where metonymy is used to give metaphor its illusory power, so we need to map how the two logics intersect. We use the concrete examples to "check our work" for accuracy and honesty. Where ideology uses binary signifiers, criticism must investigate how metonymy and metalepsis work first *for* occultation done by ideology but then work to restore the suppressed/sublated elements. Doing this without generating more binary signifiers is the trick. Every dissertation is encouraged to specify a utopian condition. No doctoral candidate wants to risk saying that there is "no solution." There is a "solution," but this is in critique, in a lucid mapping of the role of metonymy in the process of occultation.



giambattista vico (d. levine)

* vico and matters of occultation

This is a personal promotional message. Giambattista Vico, whose work is still little known and much misunderstood, addressed the process of occultation up front, in his account of how human mentality began in the first place. His discovery was the "imaginative univeral" (*inversale fantastico*), a *metonymic* process whereby the first proto-humans projected their own nature into and behind external appearances, giving them a demonic quality. Vico condensed this process into a story about thunder, which seems to have something to say to humans but humans must invent a "science of divination" to determine what. James Joyce developed this in his final masterpiece, *Finnegans Wake*. Vico shows that mythic thought is lost to our consciousness, that it is not an option. Our option is to understand our own mentality and see how the mythic mentality was constitutive of that. Myth is not the utopia of modern thought. Myth is not the antipode of rationality. Do not convert myth-rationality into a binary signifier, especially considering that Vico worked hard to show how *metonymy* created thought itself!

There are many Vichian ideas to use to explore occultation: the *verum* (the true) is occulted within the made (*factum*), as revealed by the sciences and practices of the certain (*certum*). All cultures speak a "silent mental language" to narrate an "ideal eternal history." Vico shows how all of these use occultation. His most famous "line," *verum ipsum factum* does not mean that "we can understand (only) that which we have made" but, rather that, in making/constructing the true we have occulted our own nature into nature." Vico is actually the first philosopher of artificial intelligence. His work compares favorably to Alan Turing's, for example. This is just personal advice however. You can find many ways to approach occultation, just don't get caught up in constructing binary signifiers to explain binary signifiers! There has been enough of that.

My revised book on Vico is available on-line. Not perfect, but a starter kit.

Past newsletters:

fall 2014 newsletter 1

fall 2014 newsletter 2

fall 2014 newsletter 3

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