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NATHAN K. HENSLEY

If we take presentism to mean “a bias towards present or present-day attitudes ... in the interpretation of history” (that’s the Oxford English Dictionary; another dictionary calls it an “uncritical ... tendency”), then we seem forced to understand this “bias” as a kind of intellectual sin: and perhaps, in a historical field like ours, the original one. The phrase we’re gathered to discuss concedes this, I think, since the syntactical form it borrows—“strategic BLANK-ism”—does something like cop to doing a bad thing while asking for leave because that thing is done strategically. My title comes from that model of looping, recursive historicism called *Wuthering Heights* (1847), which I will discuss later. First, I want to dwell briefly on the itinerary of the syntactic structure I just named “strategic ___-ism”—from Gayatri Spivak to Caroline Levine to us, here, now—to focus less on the goodness or badness of the last part, presentism, and more on the first, strategy.

In a 1993 interview that partially touched on her coinage “strategic essentialism,” Spivak noted that she no longer used the phrase. Pressed by well-meaning interviewers, Spivak explained that the term, after its enormously wide uptake in the American academy, “became the union ticket for essentialism,” an excuse for right-minded people to subscribe to the bad ideas—nationalism, gender ideology—congregating under that name. “As to what is meant by strategy,” she continued, “no one wondered about that” (Danius and Jonsson 35). We should follow Spivak, probably, in remaining suspicious of methodologies that crystallize so easily into portable maxims, and her question continues to resonate for us today: what is meant by *strategy*? Caroline Levine’s 2006 article “Strategic Formalism,” later reworked in her Lowell-Prize-winning 2015 book *Forms*, is experiencing a similarly vibrant citational life, and has

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more to say about formalism than the other half of what the essay's subtitle calls a "new method in cultural studies." Three years before the interview I just mentioned—the first time she renounced strategic essentialism—Spivak warned against the temptation to allow strategy to "freez[e]" (4) and acquire a "fetish-character" (3). It is often the case, Spivak explains, that "strategies are taught as if they were theories, good for all cases." But a "strategy suits a situation; a strategy is not a theory" (4).¹ I want to pause briefly on the danger Spivak notes of transforming temporary operational procedures into the static templates for thought she names "theory," and that Levine calls "method." Spivak's distinction between tactical tool and hypostasized "masterword" (3) evokes the Marxian notion of strategy as an action directed toward a goal in a particular situation, one whose "goodness" or "badness" can only ever be judged by the extent to which it helps realize an end whose justness has been agreed upon in advance.² As Vladimir Lenin says in one of his letters on strategy: "Our theory is not a dogma, but a guide to action" (n.p.).

This sense of strategy-as-weapon puts it nearer to the art of war than the disinterested pursuit of truth: it is the means by which an enemy is defeated, a tool in a just struggle. And it's in this spirit that Louis Althusser, in a set of half-sane, constantly revised lectures he began developing in 1962 and delivered for the first time in 1971, undertook to read the work of Niccolò Machiavelli, recovering this infamous amoralist as a figure for the left. Through Machiavelli's political realism, Althusser justified his own sense that action must always be fitted to a conjuncture, "an aleatory, singular case" where "all the existing concrete circumstances" are arranged in a particular way (18). Onto the typescripts that became *Machiavelli and Us* (1999), Althusser added by hand the word "*singular*," which he also underlined, and, in blue and black ballpoint pen, wrote in the word "case" four times over two pages; he was emphasizing obsessively the fact that method must always arise from, and seek to change, a unique concrete scenario (105n). The point is that there can be no such thing as strategic anything—essentialism, presentism, whatever—without first, an analysis of a specific moment in time, the present (this is Althusser's "case"); and, second, a final goal to be achieved, an end in the sense of *telos* or object.

What is our case? And, as scholars of the nineteenth century, what is our object? What are our ends? Shorthand will have to do here. The neoliberal administrative rationality that now controls all of our institutions—and there are no exceptions to this—is fundamentally presentist in orientation and economic in its logic; its vision of justice is to cut costs, to casualize labor, and to abolish the past in favor of the instrumental thinking and skills-based learning

4/ Cela signifie d'abord que M. ne pose pas le problème politique de l'unité nationale en général, ^{voilà,} ~~comme~~ un problème théorique particulier ~~en général~~ (parmi d'autres ^{cas, donc de singulière} en général) mais qu'il pose ce problème en termes de conjoncture, ~~et pas de théorie~~ ^{de la conjoncture} Je crois qu'il n'est pas aventuré de dire que M. est le premier théoricien ^{ou le premier penseur} qui ait consciemment sinon ~~même~~ ^{pensé} le concept de conjoncture, sinon fait du concept de conjoncture l'objet d'une réflexion abstraite et systématique, du moins constamment, d'une manière insistante et extrêmement profonde ^{son} ~~dans~~ la conjoncture, cad dans ~~les cas particuliers~~ ^{le cas} de cas singulier aléatoire.

Fig.1. Louis Althusser, Typescript of *Machiavelli and Us*, with handwritten corrections; typescript c. 1971–2, corrections c. 1976–76. Courtesy of L'Institut Mémoires de L'édition Contemporaine (IMEC), ALT2 A31–04.

mais seulement les fragments théoriques propres à ^{cas} de ce problème concret. ^{singulier} Voilà pour les fragments

Fig.2. Louis Althusser, Typescript of *Machiavelli and Us*, with handwritten corrections; typescript c. 1971–2, corrections c. 1976–76. Courtesy of L'Institut Mémoires de L'édition Contemporaine (IMEC), ALT2 A31–04.

that will pay the bills now. The aim of this administrative presentism is to starve humanistic thought and its care for the past until it is dead. In such a conjuncture, the question becomes how to arrange our thinking so as best to defeat our enemies. What would strategic method look like now?

In place of an answer I'll cite *Wuthering Heights*. Reasonable people will disagree about the justness of Heathcliff's goals, which are to abolish the Linton line, crush his foes so the "guest" can become "the master" (165), and reunite himself outside time with the natural world which is also Catherine. We can debate these ends. But we cannot cavil with his tactics. Heathcliff identifies his enemies and pursues their defeat with relentless, self-sacrificing fidelity. "I have a single wish," he says, "and my whole being and faculties are yearning to attain it. They have yearned towards it so long, and so unwaveringly, that ... it has devoured my existence—I am swallowed in the anticipation of its fulfillment" (289). My hunch is that we might take as an example this unflinching struggle toward a vision of the good—and to identify our own good—as we debate under austerity how to coordinate attention to historical objects with imperatives to address present concerns. Our task, I think, is to view this coordination in light

of the struggle in which it intervenes. We are in a war. How will we win it? Before answering, remember that except for in the eyes of that arch-administrator Lockwood, who stands confidently over the graves of the past and presses coins into the hands of the servants who please him most (300), Heathcliff never does rest, never does waver, even after his own death by starvation.

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NOTES

1. In more detail, Spivak states:

I have, then, reconsidered my cry for a strategic use of essentialism. In a personalist culture, even among people within the humanities, who are generally wordsmiths, it's the idea of a *strategy* that has been forgotten. The strategic has been taken as a point of self-differentiation from the poor essentialists. So long as the critique of essentialism is understood not as an exposure of error, our own or others', but as an acknowledgement of the dangerousness of something one cannot not use. (5, original emphasis)

2. In Lukács's essay "Tactics and Ethics" (1919), ethics are individual principles and tactics are—anguishingly, problematically—the means by which a general good might be actuated. The problem for Lukács is that the two might come into conflict, generating what he calls a tragic situation, demanding "sacrifice" (n.p.).

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