

“The Impious Specter of Spinozism:” Spinoza in England 1738-1854

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I’m not at all tied to the dates in my title , both of which are close to arbitrary. The first, 1738, is the year Warburton’s *Divine Legislation of Moses* came out, a work in which Spinoza appears several times as the specter of profound impiety. Warburton repeats throughout his work the classic charge of ‘atheism’ that had been leveled against Spinoza since Bayle’s dictionary and the early reactions of the Cambridge Platonists. The second date, 1854, marks the year in which George Eliot began working on the first English translation of Spinoza’s *Ethics*. She had already begun translating the *Theologico-Political Treatise* in 1849 at the request of her friend Charles Bray, but toothaches, headaches, and other intrusions from daily life intervened. Eliot’s translation is my real motivation behind asking about the place of Spinoza in England: what did it mean historically, politically, and religiously for Eliot to turn to Spinoza in the 1850’s?

The first and most obvious way to answer this question would be to turn to Eliot’s contemporaries for whom Spinoza was, in the words of Rosalie Colie, “an intellectual culture-hero.”¹ In the mid-nineteenth century there was a revival of Spinoza’s thought centered around Jeremy Bentham and James Mill’s *Westminster Review*, the periodical George Eliot edited throughout the early 1850s. William Hale White, a major figure in late-nineteenth century Spinoza criticism and translator of both the *Emendation* and the *Ethics*, worked at the *Review* from 1852 to 1854; George Henry Lewes published a series of anonymous essays on Spinoza for the *Review* and for other periodicals throughout the 1840s and 50s; and in 1854 Froude published an article for Eliot which Frederick Pollock described in 1880 as the “the best general view of Spinoza” in English.² For all of these writers Spinoza appears not as an unrepentant atheist, but as a fearless thinker who intrepidly pursued truth

¹ Colie, “Spinoza in England: 1665 -1730” pg. 183n5.

² Pollock, *Spinoza: His Life and Philosophy* pg. xxxv.

even in the face of assassination attempts, excommunication, and perennial social exclusion.³

But there is an odd sense in the admittedly slim critical literature on the Westminster crowd that the discovery of Spinoza in the 19th century *was* a discovery and that there was no history or theologico-political context to speak of beyond the charge of ‘atheism’. This is true, in a way, if we compare Spinoza’s reception to that of someone like ‘*Des Cartes*’: the attention granted to Spinoza certainly looks small, and especially if we are hoping to find something beyond charge of atheism. But small is not the same as nothing, and the theologico-political tensions of reading and writing about Spinoza were not insignificant, so I want to ask what happened between the Cambridge Platonists review and eventual dismissal of Spinoza and his re-discovery in the 1850s.

There are at least two general shifts that take place between the initial demonization of Spinoza’s thought by the Platonists and his re-figuration as the great intellectual culture-hero of the Westminster crowd.

First, his status as atheist becomes considerably less controversial. It is true that Spinozism was still inseparable from atheism in the 19th century, and that for some he was still dangerously heterodox, but the stakes were not nearly as high as they were at the end of the 17th century. If we take Rosalie Colie’s claim seriously that the story of Spinoza’s reception from 1665 to 1732 is also the story of the gradual secularization of philosophy,⁴ then Warburton’s characterization of Spinoza as the “impious phantasm of atheism” in 1738 already begins to take on the tint of slightly atavistic party politics. This is certainly the case by the end of the 18th century, when Spinoza was historically distant enough to be read with historical interest—or so the *Critical Review* and the *Edinburgh Review* would both claim.⁵ In

³ Froude’s introduction is typical in this respect: “Excommunicated, disinherited, and thrown upon the world when a mere boy to seek his livelihood, he resisted the inducements which on all sides were urged upon him to come forward in the world.” “Spinoza” pg. 275. In his 1843 “Spinoza’s Life and Works” Lewes paints Spinoza as a young, playful genius—the “young truth-seeker”—who is undeterred by threats, bribery, and attempted assassination.

⁴ Colie 210

⁵ For example, in 1802 a review of the Paulus edition of Spinoza’s works in Smollett’s *Critical Review* begins with the claim that, “The works of Spinoza form important documents in the history of metaphysical philosophy and are thus far entitled to the curious inspection of those who like to trace

1792, in *The Monthly Review*, a reviewer of Herder's *God, Some Conversations* went so far as to say that the

“design of [Herder's book] is benevolent, and highly important. Its object is to vindicate *Spinoza* from the charge of *Atheism*; and to prove that his principles, rightly understood, are calculated to convey to us more just, philosophical, and sublime ideas of God, than are contained in the systems of other philosophers, who have escaped every imputation.”

Not only does the reviewer take a historical approach to Spinoza, but there is already a hint of the reversal whereby Spinoza is no longer seen as the only real atheist, but the opposite, in the words of Novalis, a thoroughly “God intoxicated man.”

By the time we get to the Westminster reviewers, sixty years later, this neutralization of atheism and even the reversal implied in the Herder review is well-established.⁶ We may disagree with Spinoza's conclusions and we may consider his “philosophy preposterous and even pernicious,” Froude says, but we cannot avoid the fact that he has deep historical interest.⁷ Lewes will directly confront his readers and ask if we “can reconcile the fact of this being a most religious philosophy, with the other fact of its having been almost universally branded with Atheism? Is this intelligible?” For Lewes it is only intelligible if we admit the influence of “party vision and the rashness of party judgment.”⁸

It becomes harder, from this point of view to say that atheism simply was not a deterrent for the Westminster crowd. Yes, George Eliot had recently translated Strauss's *Life of Jesus* and Feuerbach's *Essence of Christianity*, and it is true that J. A. Froude attracted the attention of the *Review* precisely through the scandal surrounding his *Nemesis of Faith*, a book which was immediately denounced, burned

the progress of the art of reasoning and to appropriate the successive discoveries in ideology to their respective inventors.”

⁶ Froude claims in the introduction to “Spinoza” that “Spinoza's influence over European thought is too great to be denied or set aside” (276).

⁷ Froude, “Spinoza” 276.

⁸ Lewes, “Spinoza's Life and Works,” *Westminster Review* pg. 395-96.

and got its author fired from multiple academic positions. But the historicization and secularization of Spinoza's thought had already done its work before Lewes and Froude were able to paint him as a fearless truth-seeker in the introductions to their essays.

The second shift that seems to occur is probably closely related, but much harder to talk about. As Spinoza becomes less theologically and politically threatening, his proponents begin not only to openly declare their love and respect for Spinoza as a person, but they begin to speak of the philosophy itself less as a rigorous metaphysics, and more as a general outlook on the world. Spinoza represents a new way of living, or a new attitude toward existence (you can see that I'm trying to avoid using the word 'ethics!'). Wilfred Stone, for example, claimed that Spinoza defined for William Hale White, 'a mood rather than a metaphysic, an attitude rather than a system.'⁹ This is hardly specific to White.

Heinrich Heine will take a similar approach: 'Plato and Aristotle! They are not merely the representatives of two different systems, they are the types of two different species of humanity'. Platonists, Heine says, are 'dreamy' and 'mystical'. Aristotelians are 'practical' and 'methodical'. Spinozists, however, take what we can only guess is the best of both worlds. With Spinoza,

we become conscious of a feeling such as pervades us at the sight of great Nature in her most life-like state of repose; we behold a forest of heaven-reaching thoughts whose blossoming topmost boughs are tossing like waves of the sea, whilst their immovable stems are rooted in the eternal earth.

There is a peculiar, indescribable fragrance about the writings of Spinoza. We seem to breath in them the air of the future.¹⁰

For Heine, Spinoza is the "grand synthesis" of Aristotelian sobriety ("nature in her most life-like repose") and Platonic mysticism ("a forest of heaven-reaching thoughts"), and thus it is the blueprint for a new species of humanity, one firmly

⁹ Quoted in Boucher, *Spinoza in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Discussions*, v.III pg. 187

¹⁰ Heine, *Religion and Philosophy in Germany: A Fragment* pg. 68.

rooted in the earth, but also simultaneously in concert with the movement of the treetops.

Goethe, who confessed that he could hardly remember the details of Spinoza's metaphysics, took a similar point of view:

what especially bound me to [Spinoza] was the great disinterestedness which shone from every sentence. That wonderful expression 'Who loves God truly must not desire God to love him in return' [...] filled my whole mind. To be disinterested in everything but the most so in love and friendship was my highest desire, my maxim, my practice, and so that hasty saying of mine afterwards, 'If I love thee what is that to thee?' was spoken right out of my heart.¹¹

In each case, for White, Goethe, or Heine, Spinozism is less a metaphysics than it is a way of life, a calming influence, or a thought of the future.¹²

And thus Froude's claims in 1854 seem far less surprising. For Froude, Spinoza is no longer the opprobrious object of righteous contempt, but a "sincere and honorable man" motivated by "genuine and thorough love for good and goodness."¹³

"It is not often that any man in this world lives a life so well worth writing as Spinoza lived; not for striking incidents or large events connected with it, but

¹¹ Goethe, *The Auto-Biography of Goethe: Truth and Poetry* v.II pg. 170. Later in the autobiography Goethe will turn this Spinozism into a theory of poetic inspiration. "I had come to regard my indwelling poetic talent altogether as Nature." Often at night, this disinterested nature would suddenly surge forth in the form of little songs which Goethe would try to quickly write down before they vanished back into the impersonal anonymity from which they came. Even the slightest worldly distraction would be enough to interrupt his inspiration: "In this mood I was most pleased to get hold of the lead pencil, because this gave out the marks most readily; for it sometimes happened that the scratching and spirting [*sic*] of the pen woke me from my somnambular poetizing, confused me, and stifled a little production in its birth." *The Auto-Biography of Goethe* v.III pg. 5.

¹² The degree to which Goethe or Heine influenced the English reception of Spinoza in general is an open question. George Eliot and G.H. Lewes, however, were well aware of both Goethe and Heine's writings on Spinoza. During their time in Germany in 1954 Eliot translated much of Goethe for Lewes so that he could compose his *Life and Works of Goethe*. In 1856 she reviewed Heine for the *Westminster Review*.

¹³ Froude, "Spinoza" 275.

because (and no sympathy with his peculiar opinions disposes us to exaggerate his merit) he was one of the very best men whom these modern times have seen.”¹⁴

How does one move from atheism to “hero-worship”? I have suggested historical distance, secularization, and an increasing tendency to appreciate the person rather than the philosophy (“and no sympathy with his peculiar opinions disposes us to exaggerate his merit”) all contribute in one way or another.

But what else happened between the 1737 and 1854? I’m currently looking in two general directions. First, there is the question of the influence of German Idealism. For Coleridge, Spinoza was one stop on the way to Schelling.¹⁵ And conversely, from the point of view of Schelling and Fichte, the Spinozan project and its relentless pursuit of the infinite must have seemed far less singular to nineteenth century readers than it had to the Cambridge Platonists. Thus Lewes will suggest that Spinoza was less problematic if read in the light of Fichte and especially of Schelling, “whose philosophy is saturated with Spinozism”.¹⁶ The second point of view which might animate the reevaluation of Spinoza is the attempt to create a non-theological ethics that wasn’t grounded in science. The young George Eliot, for example, was astonished to read, in Bulwer-Lytton’s novel *Devereaux*, of an ‘amiable atheist’. And she instantly began to pursue the possibility of a non-theological ethics—and it was precisely this possibility that incensed readers of Froude’s *Nemesis of Faith* and which caused George Eliot to write Froude a complimentary letter. On the other hand, George Eliot had also rejected Herbert Spencer’s attempt to give ethics a biological foundation (and not just because Spencer notoriously responded to a love-letter from her by explaining that as much as he appreciated her intellectual beauty, biology prevented him from loving her fully). Did Spinoza let Eliot, Lewes, and Froude cut a middle way between naturalism and Christian

¹⁴ Froude, “Spinoza” pg. 274-75.

¹⁵ See, for example, chapters 9 and 10 of *Biographia Literaria*.

¹⁶ Lewes, “Spinoza’s Life and Works” pg. 404.

morality? I don't know yet. But I would greatly appreciate any comments on any of this. Thank you!!