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Critique and the Idea of Translation

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This issue of *de genere* invites us to reflect on the following question: How can translation contribute to the pursuit of a more inclusive culture that is invested in undoing hierarchies and favoring plurality? My article considers the metaphorical potential of translation for critique. It discusses the notion of translation as a movement of ideas across disciplinary borders, using as a case study the border between philosophy and theory as it is interrogated in the work and career of Fredric Jameson.

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Only ideas which are a means of transport are my concern.
Susan Sontag, *Notebooks*

[...] *no philosophy can paste the particulars into the text.*
Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*

Translation as metaphor

Translation is not only a practice; traditionally, it has also been a powerful metaphor for critique. Already in the 1920s, Walter Benjamin drew a distinction between literary criticism, intended as the exegesis or commentary of individual texts, and critique. He proposed that critique “seeks the truth content of a work of art” and “commentary seeks its material content,” but argued that the “relation between the two is determined by the basic law of literature according to which the more significant the work, the more inconspicuously and intimately its truth content is bound up with its material content” (Benjamin 1996, 297). For Benjamin, the tie between truth and its material content is intimate yet barely legible: does the luster of truth (*Schein*) inside the text appear because of the text’s materiality or is the text’s materiality striking because of its truth content? Confronted with this “basic critical question,” Benjamin resorts to the metaphor of the paleographer “in front of a parchment whose faded text is covered by the lineaments of a more powerful script which refers to that text” (Benjamin 1996, 298), who therefore must repair into legibility a shadow text overpowered by another that appears more legible. Historical distance, says Benjamin (but we could add: all manifestations of distance whether historical, geographical, cultural), “prepares for (the) critique” of texts because it “increases their power” (298). In Benjamin’s passage the initial metaphor of the paleographer will be left behind, caught in a vortex of other metaphorical transformations, but it does make the point that the critical practitioner is interested less in the single components of a text and more in its life; she is less like a chemist before a “burning funeral pyre” and more like an alchemist interested in the flames and ashes of “what has been experienced” (Benjamin 1996, 298). From this perspective, Benjamin’s metaphorical treatment of critique applies to translation: both find their vocation in preserving the enigma of “what is alive” (Benjamin 1996, 298).¹

The position before what we might call the law of aliveness, which translation shares with critique, is especially manifest in recent work in the field. No longer conceived in terms of the production of the copy of a text in another language, no longer hinged on the dichotomy fidelity/betrayal, translation today essentially refers to a dynamic relation. It is thought of as a practice that produces difference and plurality, with the contact between texts being re-evaluated through notions of rewriting and extended authorship (Gentzler 2016). This shift makes us wonder about the extent to which recent turns within critique might have actually impacted on the idea of translation. We might think, for example, of the post-colonial erosion of the unevenness of cultures, and the ensuing debate on comparison as a core but problematic critical gesture (see Radhakrishnan 2013, 34–45). We might also think of

¹ In his essay on translation, Benjamin calls this critical enigma “translatibility” (Benjamin 1996, 253–263).

the appeal of a variety of literary scholars and theorists to expanded categories of consciousness and agency (see Haraway 2016; Latour 1993; Margulis 1999; and Parrika 2012), as well as of the thriving field of world literature which is premised on the notion of culture as an incessant mixing of cultures (see Damrosch 2003). Moreover, the extent to which “postcritique,” in its efforts to find alternatives to poststructuralism and deconstruction, has impacted on translation theory remains open to investigation (see Felski 2015 and Anker and Felski 2017). Together, these strands cooperate to relocate us on a plane of extended relationality and convergences which throws into relief the productiveness of displacement, recontextualization and movement more generally for all sorts of literary practices. Some European-based scholars approach translation in terms of “migration” because it enables to gesture simultaneously toward intersemiotic migration from one media to another (and the migration of the collective imaginary across different media) and a broader view of thought and culture that is predicated on the circulation of ideas (see Guglielmi 2019). Recent work on translation, thus, highlights the points of intersection with critical thought, and translation seems aligned more than ever with the critical enterprise in its emphasis on difference and plurality as preconditions for doing justice to the complexity of texts.

Translation seems to have joined critique not only in asking the question of theory/praxis – “Can translation be a politically subversive gesture?” – but also in pursuing a more dynamic view of culture that is increasingly grasped as movement and circulation. Susan Sontag, who, like Benjamin, perceived a deep affinity between critique and translation, implicitly compared thinking to the process of translation when in a notebook entry she wrote: “Only ideas which are a means of transport are my concern,” suggesting that thinking makes itself felt as such at its most exciting only in the transfer from one context to another (Susan Sontag Papers, Box 128, Folder 5). On another occasion, she was more explicit in comparing thinking to the capacity to “mentally [...] move the world” (Sontag 2003, 286) which is afforded by the position of the thinker outside her native language and culture. Sontag feared for the exertion of this capacity if deprived of the experience of cultural “foreignness” or displacement (Sontag 2003, 286). If anything, today, Sontag’s concern has escalated. As both translation theorists and critical theorists engage the question of how ideas circulate, they find themselves immersed in a polylogue of languages and cultures that Susan Stanford Friedman has termed “planetary epistemology” (Friedman 2010, 474-5). When considered from the vantage point of gender, there is more to this phenomenon than the problem of the surfacing of new meanings and of their inscription in the larger horizon of planetary humanity. In other words, it is not only a question of how cultures adjust to an enhanced circulation of ideas and to the migration and transcoding of a collective imaginary in different media. The problem, which in itself may be said to have spurred new parallel perspectives in translation studies and critique, is the revision of our core lexicon across the disciplines. In the Humanities, key terms like subject, community, and identity have lost attractiveness precisely because they are no longer able to host an act of translation, especially when the thing to be translated is the self.

Theory and gender in transition/translation

Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* (2015), a celebrated genre-bending memoir about Nelson's relationship with her fluidly gendered partner as well as an account about pregnancy, desire, and sexuality, reminds us that writing subsists on the movement from the inexpressible to the expressible. From this perspective, Nelson may be said to return to Benjamin's enigma of the bond between materiality and truth – albeit in a Wittgensteinian key (Nelson 2014, 3-4) – when she speaks of the paradox that the inexpressible is contained in the expressed. The paradox makes her look “anew at unnameable things, at things whose essence is flicker, flow” (Nelson 2015, 4). Gender is one of these things, entangled in the act of thinking (can everything be thought?) and in that primordial act of translation that is naming. The autobiographical event of meeting and falling in love with someone whose public self-definition is “a butch on T” turns Nelson into “a study in pronoun avoidance” (Nelson 2015, 7). Harry neither rejects the gender assigned at birth nor prefers the other gender given through medical technologies. Transitioning between genders means embracing both; it is an affirmation of gender fluidity. Nelson's narrative declares its affiliation to a feminist theoretical legacy to intervene on it. She builds on Butler's position that “the *very formation of gender presupposes persons in a certain way*” (Nelson 2015, 15; italics in the original) to move beyond the traditional premise that gender relations exist in a hierarchical frame, or beyond the critical notion of gender as a paradigm of hierarchical relations. Far from representing gender as a dichotomic machine or a power dispositif, Nelson, like Benjamin's paleographer-turned-chemist before the flame and the ashes of what has been experienced, attempts to translate the self, in her own language (English), outside and beyond a series of ideological constraints, including the constraints imposed by rebellion against heteronormativity when this rebellion blocks rather than facilitates the transition of the inexpressible to the expressed.

When Nelson falls in love with Harry, she encounters, through the luster of gender, the problem of freedom. Constraints and limits become existentially condensed in the perennial discomfort originating in the cage of the body: “*I will never feel as free as you do, I will never feel as at home in the world, I will never feel as at home in my own skin. That's just the way it is, and always will be*” (Nelson 2015, 31; italics in the original). Gender renames the radical exilic condition of someone who, as Sontag would put it, cannot “move the world”; it is the term for a frozen transport of ideas.

Theoretical, philosophical and literary references make up the narrative of the personal love story in *The Argonauts*. Neither marginalia nor external sources, the beloved names listed on the side of the narrative outline a theoretical canon that is incorporated in the body of the text; their part of the conversation is often italicized in the same way that Harry's speech is italicized. For this reason, Nelson's critical theory has been singled out as an example of “autotheory,” to indicate a dialogue in the flesh with certain readings that transform into a practice of life, extending, continuing, and renewing the life of theory. Not by chance Nelson's title comes from “delectable” Roland Barthes who, in *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, compared the lover who utters the phrase “I love you” to the Argonaut “renewing his ship during its voyage” (Barthes qtd. in Nelson 2015, 5). Nelson's title places Barthes at the beginning of a long line of theorists for whom the act of writing is close to the act of translation: literally because Barthes, a French critic, must of course first pass through translation

into English; metaphorically because his work foregrounds the quality of translatability: a being that is put in place and made to appear by and through ideas.

Highlighting the weave of self and theory, books like Nelson's invite further reflection on the idea of translation within the same language. Nelson's narrative relies on a transfer of ideas between disciplines, in particular between literary criticism and philosophy, and the movement simultaneously undoes gender understood as a matrix of hierarchical relations. In fact, this sense of gender begins to appear estranging, at the same time that the division of labor among disciplines also appears strange.

Far from being an assumed legacy, the movement across disciplinary borders is today under threat as the division of labor among the disciplines is newly being enforced by literary scholars and philosophers alike. In her influential article, "Reading Dialectically," Carolyn Lesjak quotes from the presidential address of renowned scholar and former president of the Modern Language Association, Marjorie Perloff, who concludes that "instead of lusting after those other disciplines that seem so exotic primarily because we don't really practice them, what we need is more theoretical, historical, and critical training in our own discipline" (Perloff qtd. in Lesjak 2013, 234). A similar issue, we might note, has been raised in the philosophical camp, where, as Graham Harman argues, "neo-Moderns" like Quentin Meillassoux are "enforcing [...] a division of labor" among the disciplines in order to "fend off" the dangers that arise from "the work of de-taxonomization" (Harman 2016, 234). These are signs of what Lesjak describes as "the increasingly conservative mood within literary criticism and its key theoretical gestures" (Lesjak 2013, 20), with the demand inside and outside academia "for reading literature, not theory" (Lesjak 2013, 20). We need to ask: What does "reading literature, not theory" mean? Is it possible to read literature without engaging ideas? Would texts like Nelson's be considered literature or theory?

Lesjak responds by returning to Fredric Jameson and arguing for the necessity of a revival of dialectical thought. Following up on the return to Jameson, the remainder of this paper singles him out as a case study of the metaphorical potential of translation within critique. The aim is neither of course to offer new insights into Jameson's work, an impossible task given the abundance of excellent literature on this theorist,² nor to revive dialectical thought. Translation, especially when it is conceived as a "hermeneutic relation," both interpretive and interrogative in that exposes and reveals the cultural and social conditions of source materials (see Venuti 2007), becomes enmeshed in the labor of critique, with the two converging on shared questions: How do ideas move? How do cultures adjust to the migration of ideas? It is in light of these questions that Jameson becomes an interesting case study because he devoted himself to the transfer of ideas across the disciplinary borders of literary criticism and philosophy, finding that it is productive of a third discourse: theory. Theory is the product of cross-disciplinary "translation" (he insisted on its difference from philosophy); as such, it functions outside compulsory rituals of truth linked to the authority of a discipline. When inflected as a mutual shaping of disciplines, translation, as we shall see with Jameson, becomes an important tool to reflect on the extent to which the individual critic's connection to the truth is guaranteed by the field of affiliation, by strategies of "institutional self-justification" (Jameson 2009, 9).

² The list would be too long. As a way of introduction, see Buchanan 2006; Irr and Buchanan 2005; and, more recently, Duncan 2017, which reconsiders Jameson's postmodernism after the affective turn.

Jameson's borderlands

Jameson's beginnings were premised on the neighborliness, within difference, of literary criticism and philosophy and on the understanding that this proximity always involves a kind of translation and transcoding. Critique (theory) comes from the enhanced reciprocity of the two discourses and from the movement between the two. In *Marxism and Form* (1971) he called this type of movement "learn[ing] to think dialectically" (x). Despite presenting the thing as a "relatively modest and straightforward" endeavor, Jameson actually inaugurates a new type of literary critic, the much maligned "theorist," who transfers other intellectual traditions, foreign to the US, to the Angloamerican tradition (Jameson 1971, xii). The transfer certainly implies the activity of translation from one language to another as ideas from German philosophy or French theory are set in motion and recontextualized along their Euroamerican trajectory, but Jameson is more interested in the overall "exciting" and "liberating" effect of geo-linguistic displacements because they hold the promise of taking criticism to a level beyond "sheer *opinion* only" (Jameson 1971, xi; italics in the original) and relocate the critic beyond "non-reflective thinking" (Jameson 1971, 307). Like Sontag, Jameson opts for a transport of ideas that ensures the mental ability "to move the world," extending that ability to the mission of criticism.

Boundaries and constraints lose their hold as the critic turns away from what Jameson calls "object-oriented activity," perhaps another way of suggesting thematic exegesis, while a sense of potentiality sets in: "It is, of course, thought to the second power: an intensification of the normal thought processes such that a renewal of light washes over the object of their exasperation, as though in the midst of its immediate perplexities the mind had attempted, by willpower, by fiat, to lift itself mightily up by its own bootstraps" (Jameson 1971, 307). The realization of a bridged vacuum separating criticism and thought is like "a breathlessness," comparable to "the sickening shudder we feel in an elevator's fall or in the sudden dip in an airliner" (Jameson 1971, 308). Jameson describes his position at the crossroads of criticism and philosophy as a "shock" experience that "recalls us to our mental positions as thinkers and observers" (Jameson 1971, 308). The critic's belonging to his discipline – literary studies – is enhanced rather than diminished. In the preface to *Marxism and Form*, he writes: "What follows is, however, not philosophy but literary criticism, or at least a preparation for literary criticism" (Jameson 1971, xi).

His interest in the cultural past and the mystery of signs leads Jameson to conceive of interpretation as co-terminus with translation when both are seen as variants of the hermeneutic relation. Signs beckon to us; they call us, converse with us; they speak to us like distant and foreign texts in a language that we must attempt to translate always in hostile circumstances. The "rival hermeneutic" that he proposes in *The Political Unconscious* (21) is a polemical alternative to poststructuralism with its proliferation of critical approaches: "the psychoanalytic or the myth-critical, the stylistic, the ethical, the structural" (Jameson 1981, 17). Unlike these other approaches, and unlike the fashionable notion of *écriture*, Jameson's hermeneutic does not shy away from a leap that must be taken, from a distance that must be bridged: it is a question of "respecting the specificity and radical difference of the social and cultural past while disclosing the solidarity of its polemics and passions, its forms, structures, experiences, and struggles, with those of the present day" (Jameson 1981, 18). History, or, as he calls it with Joyce, the "nightmare of history," meaning "the dizzying accumulation of violence and cruelty" (Jameson 2009, 550), demands that we treat texts as if they were

written in a language that we do not understand. He laments the fact that the “modern reader” turns away from “that dry and intolerable chitinous murmur of footnotes reminding us of the implied references to long-dead contemporary events and political situations in Milton or Swift, in Spenser or Hawthorne” (Jameson 1981, 34). The temporal distance is figured as a language barrier; the interpreter, like the translator, ought not to “desperately [...] brush away” the estranging murmur of “the cobweb of topical allusion” (Jameson 1981, 34). The rare word “chitinous,” a term from biochemistry, comes from “chitin,” the substance that makes up the exoskeleton of most insects; it is etymologically close to the word for marine mollusk; they both derive from the Greek word *χιτών*, meaning tunic. The past presses in a biological fold, issuing an almost hallucinatory call from all living beings; the resistance to this primordial murmur by the modern reader-translator is tantamount to the resistance to the unconscious. “The informing presence of society within art and language is all the greater when it is indirect and invisible,” writes Jameson (Jameson 1990, 188), returning us to the paradox of the inexpressible in the expressed, which had already concerned Nelson in her unsettling of gender earlier on in our discussion. Insofar as literary criticism deals with indirectness or invisibility, it is this paradox that prevents it from becoming *a* philosophy, that is to say, a conceptual concatenation and a fixed terminology.

For Jameson, literary criticism mends and repairs. Speaking of modernism, he argues that the critic’s task is “rather to demonstrate the ways in which modernism – far from being a mere reflection of the reification of late nineteenth-century social life – is also a revolt against that reification and a symbolic act which involves a whole Utopian compensation for increasing dehumanization” (Jameson 1981, 42). The reparative view helps him elaborate on the difference between the philosophical and the aesthetic, building on Adorno, who, with reference to the conceptual categories of the experience of “perception,” warned about “the illicit attempt to transform bodily immediacy into more ‘spiritualized’ and idealistic forms of abstract thinking” (Jameson 1990, 158). The movement between literary criticism and philosophy brings about another discourse that is “not philosophy” (Jameson 1971, xi); it brings into the light of translatability a critical discourse which specifically thematizes “a mind-oriented, philosophical dread, of what cannot in aesthetic experience or elsewhere, be philosophized” (Jameson 1990, 158). Tarrying in the gap between philosophy and literary criticism is the kind of criticism that he wished to introduce with the transfer of other traditions to the Angloamerican tradition. Critique or theory comes from the question of disciplinary borders; it is a not-philosophy: on the side of philosophy but different. In Jameson’s words: “the momentary and ephemeral act of unification in which we hold multiple dimensions of time together for a glimpse that cannot prolong itself into the philosophical concept” (Jameson qtd. in Lesjak 2013, 21).

What’s in a name? (Postmodernism)

But how does the question of an aesthetic that cannot be philosophized unfold in the rest of Jameson’s work? What does it mean that aesthetic experience cannot be philosophized? Does Jameson, in defending an alternative hermeneutic, have in mind the detail that escapes a conceptual system? Does he share with Gerald Bruns an understanding of interpretation that is premised on the observer’s “fascination with particulars” (Bruns 1992, 16)? Wouldn’t these particulars resemble Barthes’s notion of the *punctum* which, in his study on photography, marked the French theorist’s

transition from semiology, therefore system, to an *écriture* of lateral connections of which Jameson is suspicious because of its a-historical tendency to translate every kind of past into the present (Jameson 1981, 34)? When Jameson talks of theory as “a glimpse that cannot prolong itself” into philosophical armature, he also generalizes the figure of the critic, who sheds any special trait in favor of the more anonymous identity of “observer and thinker.” The vague identity allows for a new freedom to focus attention outward, toward what is given, in other words, the surrounding environment. As energies migrate from literature to other artefacts like buildings, the observed – or the given – buttresses the thinker, giving him words for something that cannot be a philosophical system. One of such words is “postmodernism.”

Architectural objects like the Bonaventure Hotel downtown Los Angeles, designed by architect and developer John Portman, afford the opportunity for grasping literary periodization in terms of transcoding. Modernism relied on “expressive correspondence”: the interior projects outward to the outside with “plastic lines” that change walls into an aesthetic pliant skin of the “realities within” (Jameson 1991, 135). But Jameson’s present speaks of the inverse procedure: it is the outside that transcodes the inside. The subjectivity of the critic is not immune to the procedure. Jameson’s postmodernism indicates a “condition,” suggesting the subjective alignment with and the unavoidable consent to the surroundings. It names the waning of introspection that Adorno had already remarked in relation to the late stage of industrial capitalism, when an “immense expansion of society” had brought on an epistemological disorientation, and the “conceptual shells that were to house the whole according to philosophical custom” had come “to seem like relics” (Adorno 2007, 3). Adorno himself knew that the introverted thinker was already an anachronism at the times of Goethe who talked of “seedy scholars feasting on subjective speculation,” but the culture industry represented the end-station for the introspective thinker, pushed to the outer border of “the phantasms of profundity” (Adorno 2007, 3; 17). He cautioned against such phantoms – at the bottom of profundity he could only see total domination – and advocated for an exodus that leaves philosophy to its incompleteness and its dependence on the outside. The desire coming from outside a discipline influences its constitution. The reciprocal binding of disciplinary inside and outside, of which philosophy and art are a paradigmatic example, not only accelerates the late capitalist exodus from introspection but is also, importantly, experienced as a fall—as a loss of method.

Jameson’s postmodernism retraces such a loss affectively. He presents it as a weave of “intensities,” somewhat recalling the language of Jean-François Lyotard’s *Libidinal Economy* (1993), but essentially he raises the question of the critic’s access to and transformation by a region of impersonal feelings that have become unanchored, “are now free-floating,” and “tend to be dominated by a particular kind of euphoria” (Jameson 1991, 16), all of which suggests the successful suspension of a familiar conceptual support. The word “postmodernism” functions as the placeholder for a “situation,” as Jameson writes, for a condition that amounts neither to ecstatic abandon nor to the surrender of any conceptual willed action. It names less a method for criticism and more a criticism of subjective involvement. Alien surroundings that nevertheless provide a desirable anchorage seem to yield the productive repeat of the exodus from introspection, when spatial estrangement and vertigo feel like a reawakened encounter with history as a symptom, that is to say, abridged in the extreme in the force of a materiality that overwhelms the observer. The architectural

object gives Jameson's observer the words to describe his condition, and what in *The Political Unconscious* was history's murmur and its call to be restored "to life and warmth" (Jameson 1981, 19) now becomes compressed in the objecthood of the building. The Bonaventure Hotel is a disorienting environment: it sends the critic plummeting into a spiritual space, in a Dantesque descent that is barely veiled, at the same time that it enables "cognitive mapping" (Jameson 1991, 51). The gate of the building is uncannily invisible, a sign that access is figured as dispersed, multiple sovereignty. There are three entrances, all of them "lateral and backdoor affairs" (Jameson 1991, 39). Vertical, hierarchical relations of power are altered in favor of a "populist insertion into the city fabric" (Jameson 1991, 39). In order to enter the visitor does not climb up but takes an escalator from the second floor down to the main registration desk (Jameson 1991, 39), admitted to a "minicity" that aspires not to be a part of the city but "rather its equivalent and replacement or substitute" (Jameson 1991, 40). The miniature sensation represents a different kind of warmth; as if in a fabled means of transport, the critic is admitted to "a new total space," with the transit restoring unexpectedly all the creative and theoretical possibilities of the beloved object of thought: the collective. Jameson records the auroral apparition of "a new collective practice" and touches again the object of thought: "A new mode in which individuals move and congregate, something like the practice of a new and historically original kind of hypercrowd" (Jameson 1991, 40).

He can then return to Marx: a true "dialectical view of historical development" would consist in "do[ing] the impossible, namely, to think this development [...] positively and negatively at once; to achieve, in other words, a type of thinking that would be capable of grasping the demonstrably baleful features of capitalism along with its extraordinary and liberating dynamism simultaneously within a single thought" (Jameson 1991, 47). Ascending and descending; we must "lift our minds," he had said in *Marxism and Form*. Yet, in that early work, the beginning of theory, the brand of literary criticism that is "not philosophy," was represented with the dread and elation of a descent, as when in flight. Resuming this strange feature of dialectical thought, now Jameson invents the "postmodern era" (Jameson 1991, 47).

In the reading of the Bonaventure Hotel, despite the "dramatic" descent into the "confusion of the place" (Jameson 1991, 43), the critic must steady himself, looking out, and, as the book (literature) and architectural object become part of the same space, he gains insight into the present and into "our minds": "So I come to my final point here that this latest mutation in space – postmodern hyperspace – has finally succeeded in transcending the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself, to organize its immediate surroundings perceptually, and cognitively to map its position in a mappable external world" (44). He can then go on and suggest that "this alarming disjunction can stand as the symbol and analogon of that even sharper dilemma which is the incapacity of our minds, at least at present, to map the great global multinational and decentered communicational network in which we find ourselves caught as individual subjects" (44). The point of arrival is the mind stalling: the glimpse that cannot prolong itself into the philosophical concept. Postmodernism is one of the ways (if not, at least in Jameson, *the way*) in which the observer's re-connection with the warmth of history is authenticated and, with that re-connection, the legitimacy of the critic. Jameson denies that postmodernism is an ideological fantasy; he affirms its historical reality defining "postmodern [...] space" as a "multinational" and "global" explosion of culture and giving the term periodizing power (49). The multinational

membrane that he describes, far from resembling a diasporic plane where centers and peripheries have been rearranged, seals hermetically another kind of murmur: while everything has become cultural, it also remains “untheorized” (48).

From method to moments

From the vantage point of Jameson’s work, theory appeared in response to the problem of truth certification within disciplinary fields: “the emergence of theory in the past years has seemed to offer a space outside the institutions and outside the rehearsal of such compulsory rationalizations, and it is the claims of theory (if not its achieved realities) which allow us to grasp the limits of philosophy as such, very much including dialectical philosophy” (Jameson 2009, 9). Thus, he grasps theory “as the perpetual and impossible attempt to dereify the language of thought, and to preempt all the systems and ideologies which inevitably result from the establishment of this or that fixed terminology” (9). Theory amounts to the suspension of two connected tendencies: the tendency of a disciplinary field to close into itself (“dereify the language of thought” (Jameson 2009, 9)) and the tendency to build conceptual systems that become esoteric terminology; it is vigilant about the rift between truth and method; it is the sentinel of that vacuum, and a protection against formalism. The mutability of its language is one of theory’s prime attributes, since this discourse born of the transport of ideas between literary criticism and philosophy aims at undoing terminologies to prevent a system or an ideology from being one, as Jameson remarks with regard to deconstruction: “Deconstruction is thus the very paradigm of a theoretical process of undoing terminologies which, by virtue of the elaboration of the terminology that very process requires, becomes a philosophy and an ideology in its own turn and congeals into the very type of system it sought to undermine” (Jameson 2009, 9).

Like dialectical thought, which is premised on the negation of “a common-sense empiricist view of reality,” theory treats “first impressions” as mental objects that, like the text in *The Political Unconscious*, come drenched in interpretations and incorporate them (Jameson 2009, 59). The metamorphosis of the literary critic into the literary thinker starts in the discomfort of a fragmented vision, required by the act of straining to see. Earlier in his work, Jameson had compared criticism to the sciences, speaking of “the thinking mind” that “remains cool and untouched, skilled but unselfconscious” and “is able to forget itself wholly in the content and problems offered it” (Jameson 1971, 45). At that time, he had spoken of “method”: “The dialectical method is precisely this preference for the concrete totality over the separate abstract parts” (Jameson 1971, 45). Later in his career, in *Valencies of the Dialectic*, he speaks of “moments.” While earlier on, the dialectic, which he defines as “that inveterate, infuriating perversity” whereby things as they are are negated and undermined, might have been easily confused with a philosophical system, later it means the discovery of the nuances of a first impression and “belongs to theory rather than philosophy”:

This is why the dialectic belongs to theory rather than philosophy: the latter is always haunted by the dream of some foolproof, self-sufficient, autonomous system, a set of interlocking concepts which are their own cause. This mirage is of course the afterimage of philosophy as an institution in the world, as a profession complicit with everything else in the status quo in the fallen ontic realm of ‘what is.’ Theory, on the other hand, has no vested interests inasmuch as it never lays claim to an absolute system, a non-ideological formulation of itself and its ‘truths’,

indeed, always itself complicit in the being of current language, it has only the never-ending, never-finished task and vocation of undermining philosophy as such, of unraveling affirmative statements and propositions of all kinds. (Jameson 2009, 59).

If theory offers “a space outside the institutions and outside the rehearsal of [...] compulsory rationalizations” (Jameson 2009, 9), and if all that we have said here about the metamorphoses of the critic in Jameson’s work is reasonable, then theory is also an I-experience, something similar to what Foucault calls “I-alethurgy,” meaning an attestation or an authentication of the truth via the words spoken on the basis of having been present (Foucault 2012, 48). In Jameson’s case, presence would regard his willingness to encounter history, much as Benjamin did, as symptom, in haunting images that keep the I of the observer and thinker tied to speech that must be restored (see Benjamin 2003).³

For Jameson, “the emergence of theory in the past years has seemed to offer a space outside the institutions and outside the rehearsal of such compulsory rationalizations” by which he means the rituals of truth verification (Jameson 2009, 9). These rituals jar with a modernity that Jameson’s theorist comes to perceive as an overwhelming multiplicity that is responsible for “ordering the chaos,” much as, through abstract thought and universals, the Greeks tried to “order the chaos of an older ‘pensée sauvage’” (Jameson 2019, 344).

The alien surroundings in which Jameson’s practitioner, charged with the task to “make time and History appear” (Lesjak 2013, 19), must reconstitute speech to something or someone, if only temporarily, do not refer solely to the distance of the cultural past and to the waning of its meaning for the present; rather, they extend to the very condition of speech. Speech itself always takes place in alien surroundings and is in need of translation all the time. Thinking and interpretation are always a traversal, a translation. The warmth of history, however, may ensure a more mitigated alienness; it may upkeep the literary critic’s self-authentication, the self-verification of his or her truth. On the basis of this problem, Jameson changed, erased, and re-invented the figure of the critic, a labor that the division of labor among disciplines would eclipse and render meaningless.

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³ I discuss the question of history as symptom in greater detail in “Voglia di realtà (Aura, storia, pensiero critico),” *Conrad, Eliot, Grass, Benjamin, Dresen, e le scenografie della memoria. Oltre l’Europa: storia e letteratura*, eds. Mario Martino and Antonella Gargano, forthcoming with Lithos, Rome.

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Archives

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