

READING IN THE DARK: AFTER THEORY

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1. Since Heidegger's explicit critique of *theoria* "as a looking-at that sunders and compartmentalizes", philosophy and critical theory's use of metaphors drawn from vision have continued to dwindle and darken.¹ In 1968, in the days "before Broadway became a boulevard of theory",² Hannah Arendt could still name the English translation of Benjamin's essays of literary criticism *Illuminations*. Her introduction nevertheless takes care to foreground Benjamin's analogy of the literary critic as alchemist of the funeral pyre of literature, one who in dark times continues to "inquire about the truth whose living flame goes on burning over the heavy logs of the past and the light of ashes of life gone by".³ While sight metaphors do not entirely disappear from Benjamin's work, the compressed intensity of momentary illumination that slips by in a "flash" or blink of the eye, marks the impending obsolescence of "visionary" metaphors and the turn toward the auditory. "Knowledge comes only in lightning flashes. The text is the long roll of thunder that follows".⁴ These lines from Benjamin's *Arcades Project* trace this turn towards the auditory in microcosm, one that Arendt will continue to address across a larger domain in her own contributions to theory as well as in her introductory comments to *Illuminations*. For Arendt, the literary critic in general, and Benjamin in particular, despite his own metaphors, is less the alchemist practicing the "obscure art of transmuting" literary material into "the shining, gold of truth", or "of watching over and interpreting the historical process" whereby literature feeds the "living flame" of whatever truths continue to burn.⁵ Rather, whether blinded by the flash, or by the encroaching darkness, the literary critic has "no far-sightedness or 'prophetic vision'", Arendt writes, transposing the words Benjamin wrote of Kafka, "but listen[s] to tradition", and "he who listens hard does not see".⁶ In this, Arendt concludes, Benjamin, without realising it, had more affinity to Heidegger, who turned to auditory metaphors to "listen to the call of Being",⁷ than to his Marxist friends in the Frankfurt School, like Adorno, who would continue with damaged vision to watch over Enlightenment in the darkness,

1 M. Heidegger, "Science and Reflection", 163, 166.

2 L. Wieseltier, Preface to *Illuminations*, vii.

3 W. Benjamin, "Goethe's Elective Affinities", cited in Arendt, Introduction to *Illuminations*, 5.

4 W. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 456.

5 H. Arendt, Introduction to *Illuminations*, 5.

6 W. Benjamin, "Some Reflections on Kafka", *Illuminations*, 143, cited also by Arendt, Introduction to *Illuminations*, 49.

7 Cf. M. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 157-159.

claiming “the splinter in your eye is the best magnifying glass”.⁸

2. We may not agree with Arendt’s analysis of Benjamin’s intellectual affinities. Indeed, as Arendt might tell us, Benjamin’s enduring presence across the intellectual landscape lies in his incommensurability, his resistance to compartmentalisation within the latest critical tool-box on the academic market. Nevertheless, the darkening pressure upon theory’s use of metaphors drawn from vision, and the turn toward the auditory that Arendt identifies as latent in Benjamin’s writing, traverses and goes beyond Heidegger, Benjamin, and his Marxist, Frankfurt school friends. Indeed, it continues today. Part I of this paper, “The Darkening of Vision and the Ear of the Other”, briefly traces this turn as it emerges from the dark days of totalitarianism in the post-war period through the golden age of theory in the last decades of the 20th century, and indicates the political, philosophical, material-aesthetic pressures motivating it. My purpose, however, is not to illuminate a roadmap through the seemingly endless proliferation of theoretical discourses. It is rather, to “listen to tradition” — to sound-out tensions and uncanny affinities between traditional literary (Formalist) hermeneutics and post-structuralist positions from the golden age of theory, both of whose claims for mastery still haunt critical practice and pedagogy.

3. Today, of course, in the wake of the hey-day of Theory, metaphors, those animate props in critical philosophy’s thought-experiments, continue to mutate. The second part of my paper will attend to these 21st century mutations, through the combined pressures of the spatial, affective, and ethical turn, to the latest anthropotechnic and eco-critical turn, in the works of, respectively, Peter Sloterdijk and Timothy Morton. Sloterdijk has a Benjaminian fondness for metaphor and shadowy, darkened interior spaces (such as those Benjamin moved through in *The Arcades Project*). As an irreverent antagonist of leftist theory — he happily declared the death of the Frankfurt School⁹ — Sloterdijk follows the unrealised Heideggerian strain of thought in Benjamin’s work. His *Spheres Trilogy* (2011, 2016) adapts Heidegger’s *Being and Time* for the 21st century as *Being and Space*, claiming that in these dark times, the fundamental question is not the Heideggerian-existentialist, “Who are we?” but “Where are we?” In “Clearing and Illumination: Notes on the Metaphysics, Mysticism and Politics of Light” (*The Aesthetic Imperative*, 2018), discovery of where we are involves getting past the ocular obsession of Western metaphysics, and its outworn analogy between “world, intellect and cognition” and “lamp, the eye, and light”, in order to restore “the real breadth of openness to the world”.¹⁰ This openness, in turn, involves a release from the mastery of a

8 T.W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 50. Cf also M. Jay, *Splinters in Your Eye*.

9 P. Sloterdijk, 1999, 35.

10 P. Sloterdijk, “Clearing and Illumination: Notes on the Metaphysics, Mysticism and Politics of Light”, *The Aesthetic*

disembodied, self-contained (logocentric) cogito or what Sloterdijk calls the “fundamentum inconcussum” and its “semantic slavery”.¹¹ Sloterdijk’s effort then is to locate the human as a “medium percussum” immersed in a resonant sphere of audio-tactile relations “vibrating throughout with sounds, voices, feelings and thoughts” that others “always cause to quiver” in “performances that [mean] the world”.¹²

4. Timothy Morton, unlike Sloterdijk, has avowed affinities to Benjamin and his Marxist friends of the Frankfurt School, and manages a remarkable resuscitation of the long-forgotten Herbert Marcuse, whose *Aesthetic Dimension* (1977) opens a space linking literary aesthetics and the environment. Indeed, Morton’s introduction to his *Ecology without Nature* (2007), “Toward a Theory of Ecological Criticism”, reminds us of the “strong ecological flavour” of Adorno’s writing, and that Benjamin’s concept of the aura uses an environmental image — that of distant, hypostasized Nature.¹³ The withering of the auratic power of this concept of Nature, an aura cultivated by contemporary ecocriticism and Nature writing, is necessary, as Morton argues, in order to “undermine the stories we tell about how we are involved in nature”, to overcome mystical, Romantic illusions that our “deepest ecological experience would be full of love and light”, and to open our perception to what he calls *Dark Ecology* — to the darkness of “life in the shadow of ecological catastrophe”.¹⁴ Like Sloterdijk, Morton attaches visual metaphors to the ideology he wants to subvert, that of “Nature” as “a focal point”, a “mirror of our mind”, and a conceptual object we fixate upon, in attitudes ranging from rhapsodic Nature worship to instrumental mastery.¹⁵ In order to “subvert fixating images of ‘Nature’”, to “dissolve the object”, and “render the ideological fixation inoperative”, Morton proposes to “explore the shadow lands” of the aesthetic dimension through what he calls an “ambient poetics, a way of conjuring up a sense of a surrounding atmosphere or world” that is non-conceptual, ungraspable yet palpable, and resistant to mastery.¹⁶ As is appropriate for perceiving in darkness and shadow, the set of critical concepts Morton proposes in his analysis of how the ambient poetics of art and literature conjure up an expanded ecocritical sense of the surrounding environment involves a series of auditory metaphors. These include the timbral (effects of resonance and the material qualities of vibrations in space), the Aeolian (ambient perceptual effects without subject or author), and tone (atmospheric qualities of

Imperative, 50.

11 P. Sloterdijk, “Where are we when we hear music”, *The Aesthetic Imperative*, 39.

12 *Ibid.*, 38.

13 T. Morton, *Ecology Without Nature*, 24, 61.

14 *Ibid.*, 187. See also T. Morton, *Dark Ecology* (2018).

15 T. Morton, *Ecology Without Nature*, 20, 186.

16 *Ibid.*, 20, 22.

intensity, amplitude, mood). Despite their political differences, then, both Morton and Sloterdijk insist that we overcome our ocularcentric obsessions with the theory and literature of illumination and learn to read by listening in the dark. Is this penchant for listening in the dark merely a deconstructive overturning of the dominance of visual paradigms in Western thought? Or a metaphorical extension of the mood of existential and moral pessimism shrouding the failure of enlightened humanity to attend to the non-human world? By way of answering these questions, it seems pertinent to recall briefly what troubled literature and theory's association with metaphors of light, and inspired the darkening of vision and the turn towards the auditory.

The Darkening of Vision and the Ear of the Other

5. What Heidegger had called in his essay of 1955 “the sundering and compartmentalisation of *theoria*” had already begun with the retreat of Formalist criticism from the pressures of politics in the public sphere, with claims for the autonomy of poetic language and of criticism as an autonomous discipline necessary to maintain the mystical, visionary status of both artist and critic. Today, one might only vaguely recall the ivory-towered bastions of Formalist New Criticism, or M.H. Abrams’ *The Mirror and the Lamp* (1953), the iconic study of literary metaphors of mind, from the Neo-Classical, Platonic conception of mind as reflector of external objects, to the Romantic conception of mind as radiant projector illuminating objects of perception. And one may not remember the shadow that fell upon their already enfeebled light, with Paul De Man’s demolition of Formalist criticism and its visionary metaphors in *Blindness and Insight* (1971), with essays that both announced the “The Dead-End of Formalist Criticism”, and the rhetoric of blindness in Derrida’s *Rousseau*. De Man’s collection of essays, written in the 1960s (“in the tone of the [continental] Dozent preaching in the American wilderness”) unleashed, in the words of one younger contemporary, a “violence which aims to take the light by storm”.¹⁷ It both celebrated while slighting the “blind and violent passion with which Heidegger treats texts”¹⁸ as well as the deceptive illuminations of the New Critics, “who owe their best insights to the assumptions these insights disprove”.¹⁹ We may have forgotten, perhaps for good political reasons, both De Man’s deconstructive dominance in the North American academy and his downfall. Yet through the remainder of the 20th century, claims for the “truth” of poetic language, for the science of criticism

17 S. Corngold, “Error in Paul de Man”, 505.

18 P. De Man, “Les exégèses de Hölderlin par Martin Heidegger”, *Critique*, 801.

19 P. De Man, *Blindness and Insight*, ix.

as an autonomous discipline, and for the critical mastery associated with literary hermeneutics, would continue to battle the deconstructive project of overturning visual metaphors and identifying dark, gaping holes in the totalising claims of discursive structures. This battle is exemplified by the critical trajectory of Harold Bloom, inheritor of the literary critical illuminations of M.H. Abrams and Northrop Frye, as well as De Man's colleague at Yale. Bloom briefly became a somewhat unwilling fellow traveller of the deconstructive company known as "the Yale school of criticism" (De Man, Derrida, Geoffrey Hartman, J. Hillis Miller) with whom he published *Deconstruction and Criticism* (1980). He nevertheless maintained his allegiance to the light, from *The Visionary Company* (1961) to *The Inward Light of Criticism* (2019), and went on to rail against the rising darkness of Theory represented by "Feminists, Afrocentrists, Marxists, Foucault-inspired New Historicists and Deconstructors" whom he identified as "members of the School of Resentment".²⁰

6. To be sure, Foucault's critical discourse analysis of the triad "power/knowledge/subjectivity" that fuelled theory's deconstruction of dominant discourses continued to use visual metaphors. Foucault nevertheless aligns these with the forces of subjection bound up in the ocularcentric metaphor of the "panopticon", and with disciplinary systems of observation, surveillance and, indeed, interpretation.²¹ Against interpretative modes of visionary revelation — whether the disorienting "perplexity"²² associated with Benjamin's flash of momentary illumination, or the gnostic-authoritative New Critical depth-perception of secret meanings — Foucault's preferred mode of reading favours both opacity and radiant blindness in the encounter with writing that is "perceptible but not decipherable, given in a lightning flash and without a possible reading, present in a radiance that blinds the reader".²³

7. Following Foucault, as both a symptom of, and protest against, the linguistic turn and the "phallogocentrism" of dominant discourses, what Martin Jay called the "downcast eyes" of post-structuralist theory intensified the turn towards metaphors drawn from the sense of hearing.²⁴ Alongside Derrida and Deleuze, the feminist and post-colonial theory of Irigaray, Spivak, and Bhabba, would listen with "the ear of the Other"²⁵ to stuttering in the interstitial non-spaces of *différance* between seeing and speaking, writing and reading, clearing a shadowed space for the

20 H. Bloom, *The Western Canon*, 20.

21 M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 203-204.

22 "[...] the novel gives evidence of the profound perplexity (*Ratlosigkeit*) of the living", W. Benjamin, "The Storyteller", *Illuminations*, 87.

23 M. Foucault, *Raymond Roussel*, 59, cited in Jay, "In the Empire of the Gaze", 208.

24 M. Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, 493.

25 J. Derrida, *The Ear of the Other*, 1985.

otherwise silenced to be heard, if not interpreted. “If in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak”, writes Spivak, “the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow”, to which Irigaray rejoins, “one must listen to her with another ear”.²⁶ This other ear, or the ear of the Other, does not listen for the intelligible clarity of direct speech or decipherable words but attends to that which resonates in the space between, in the “uncertain dark” or “uncertain interstices” of the system of signs dominating language and history.²⁷ Throughout the work of these theorists, locating the space between discursive structures — or the uncertain interstices of that which is perceptible but not decipherable, heard but not spoken — involves “a descent into night, an invasion of the shadow”, as Bhabha writes, re-citing Levinas in a claim for the ethical-aesthetic activity of literature to negotiate the failures of language and traumas of history.²⁸

8. It may not surprise us, that in relation to the traumas of history, Bhabha turns to Benjamin, citing the historical materialist who “cannot do without the present which is not a transition, but in which time stands still”, not in a moment of illumination but of a writing that “blasts open the homogenous course of history”.²⁹ This writing, Bhabha goes on, “interrupt[s] time by a movement going on the hither side of time, in its interstices”, and inscribes the “freak displacements [...] that have been caused within cultural lives of postcolonial societies”.³⁰ Here, Bhabha invokes Benjamin’s homeless modern novelist as the paradigm case of a postcolonial world literature marking the traumas of history, insofar as this writing, as Benjamin claimed, “carries the incommensurable to the extremes [...] and in the midst of life’s fullness, gives evidence of the perplexity of the living”.³¹ However, while Benjamin emphasizes *our* perplexity and helplessness as readers in relation to literature’s power to trouble *us*, one has the sense that the Theorist as listening reader, and as master of interstices, uncertainty, gaps, and breaches, is less troubled or helpless than the literature attended to, which seems insubstantial, helpless, blasted through with holes which are then re-inscribed and overwritten by the masters of theory.

9. This power reversal, and the problematic ethics of deconstruction in relation to the ontology of literature, is exemplified in Bhabha’s treatment of lines from Auden’s poem, “The Cave of Making”, which he cites to demonstrate the “tenuous survival of literary language itself which

26 G. Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” 288; L. Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, 29.

27 H. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 40.

28 E. Levinas, “Reality and Its Shadow”, cited in Bhabha, “The World and the Home”, 150.

29 W. Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History”, *Illuminations*, 262, cited in Bhabha, “The World and the Home”, 144.

30 H. Bhabha, “The World and the Home”, 146.

31 W. Benjamin, “The Storyteller”, *Illuminations*, 87, cited in Bhabha, 146.

allows memory to speak”: “While knowing Speech can (be) at best, a shadow echoing, /the silent light, bear witness /to the truth it is not”.³² Here, Bhabha’s parenthetical insertion “(be)” overwrites the uncertain gaps in Auden’s original syntax with a copula such that we read the first line as a positive assertion regarding the ontology of literary language: “Knowing speech can (be) at best a shadow echoing”. Bhabha’s insertion establishes a relation of identity between “Speech” and “shadow echoing” to suit the deconstructive theorist’s darkening vision and the ear of the other; in other words, for Bhabha, “Speech *is* a shadow echoing”, a shadow echoing within the darkness of the cave of literary language. Auden’s original lines leave us more perplexed and uncertain: “While knowing Speech can at best, a shadow echoing, /the silent light, bear witness /to the truth it is not, he wished it were”. The syntactical disruption produced by the missing verb (“to be”) in Auden’s original lines leaves a gap and ontological instability in the first line. This shifts the emphasis and the weight of reading to the second and third lines, where the verb “bear”, provides a grammatically complete sentence: “While knowing Speech can at best bear witness to the truth”. Here, “the truth” is syntactically analogous to “the silent light”, but there is no positive relation of identity, as highlighted by Auden’s negation “it is not”. Our knowing speech, and literary language, may at best bear witness to the light of truth. But if the light (of at least contingent truth) exists at all, it is not (in Auden’s revision of Platonic allegory) in the realm of *logos* or ideal forms, of literary language or its shadowy echoes, but out there beyond the cave of the words on the page, beyond the literary or theoretical text, in the world of praxis.

10. This is, at any rate, the charge brought against the masters of theory by recent critical reassessments such as Bernard Harcourt’s, *Critique and Praxis: A Radical Critical Philosophy of Illusions, Values, and Actions* (2020) and Louis Menand’s *The Free World: Art and Thought in the Cold War* (2021), both of which make strange familiars of the Formalist literary critics and 20th century masters of Theory. For Menand, in their different demands for the autonomy of the text, continental theorists and New Critics both retreated from the politics and histories of the outside world that might problematize the voice of critical authority, whether in the form of the structuralist or post-structuralist reaction against the use of art by totalitarianism, or as a distancing from their own problematic pasts (the New Critics Ransom and Richards’s association with Southern Agrarian White Supremacy, De Man’s war-time record as a Nazi propagandist). Ultimately, writes Menand,

Deconstruction realized the dream of (the New Critics) Ransom and Richards of a purely professional mode of literary analysis. [...] It had the same appeal and shortcomings as the New Criticism. It

32 *Ibid.*, 145.

generated intellectual power by bracketing off most of what might be called the real-life aspects of literature—that literature is written by people, that it affects people, that it is a report on experience.³³

Harcourt offers a similar critique of Theory's retreat from the world, resuscitating Marx, if not Benjamin's Marxist friends, in re-issuing the call that thinkers should change the world rather than merely critique it. He re-traces the past decades of theory — ideology critique, Foucault's discourse analysis, Derrida's *différance*, the post-colonial theory of Spivak and Bhabha — and argues that these thinkers may have liberated us from misguided, oppressive representations of the world by deconstructing the systems of thought and discursive structures subtending them, opening a theoretical space to replace old hegemonic unities and "Truth" with diversity. Yet in clearing the epistemological ground, and "unveil[ing] ideological interferences, to let others see properly", they nevertheless negotiated the "asymmetries of clairvoyance" between the critic and the masses by retreating to the "margins of power in rhetoric and English departments".³⁴ They "shy away from praxis" and "seek shelter in theoria".³⁵ For Harcourt, in other words, despite their attempt to deconstruct metaphors of light and vision, these thinkers are just as subject to what Heidegger called "the sundering and compartmentalisation of theoria" as the "visionary" Formalists they critiqued.

11. Harcourt does not explain the deeper philosophical reasons behind such claims. For these, one might turn back to Hannah Arendt, who also criticized the retreat from the world of praxis bound up in the history of European thought and its "logocentric" metaphors: from Plato through the Enlightenment, metaphors for thinking link the penetrating light of reason to truth, to modernity's logo-centric mode of thinking as the "silent dialogue of me with myself"³⁶ linking thinking to the purity of autonomous forms of language. Deconstruction may have shifted the metaphors for thinking from the self-referential closure of the subject to the openness of listening with the ear of an indeterminate Other. Yet, exposure of the artifice that had always subtended illuminations of truth and meaning, and of the shadowy darkness between the systemic operations of thinking subject and mastered object, still belongs to the Enlightenment's will to demystify and expose. Listening in the darkness and shadows of deconstruction, in other words, is still an experience with the shadow of Enlightenment systems and the European metaphysics of light, not their overturning.

12. In the end, rather than any intellectual or political failure, the Formalist's claim to subjective

33 L. Menand, *The Free World*, 292.

34 B. Harcourt. *Critique and Praxis*, 8.

35 *Ibid.*, 10.

36 H. Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 122.

mastery of (textual) objects by the penetrating light of reason, and continental theory's exposure of the artifice that had always subtended illuminations of truth and meaning, as of the shadowy darkness between the systemic operations of thinking subject and mastered object, are met with the same fate as any specialised power tool in the "ordinary" free world's market-place of ideas — namely, obsolescence. Or, as Peter Sloterdijk notes in "Black Empiricism", his playful rejoinder to Derrida's "White Mythology": "Metaphysical systems" — and the deconstructive attempt to overturn them — "do not 'fail', but fade, seep away, stagnate, become boring, old hat, unimportant and improbable".³⁷

13. In the wake of Deconstruction, that which emerged to excite new critical interest had less to do with what Menand calls the "real-life" aspects of literature, than with what Benjamin would have recognised as the historically evolving material conditions of experience, and the sensory, perceptual adaptations these implied.³⁸ Among these were the material and aesthetic pressures associated with the proliferation of audio-visual media, as well as the material-ethical and existential pressures of the environment as a medium sustaining life. Notwithstanding the apparently divergent polarities of the fields these pressures gave rise to, both the mechanically orientated fields of media studies, film and visual culture studies, on the one hand, and the organically orientated field of ecocriticism, on the other, turn to auditory metaphors to articulate their aesthetic, ethical and critical positions. In regards to the latter, despite all claims for the supposed dominance of visual culture, counterintuitively, the endless proliferation of images, sounds and words produced by new electronic media would mark the limit of visual paradigms based on the subject's ability to grasp — that is, to illuminate, interpret, and master — distinct objects of vision. Rosalind Krauss' *The Work of Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition* (1999), updating Benjamin's "Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", argues that the work of art in the age of electronic multi-media — the capacity to mix word, image and sound in one work — produces a heterogeneous media ecosystem of diverse forms, spaces and temporalities. This releases us into the darkness of a "discursive chaos, a heterogeneity of activities without unifying core" that announces the end of medium-specific modes of audience address, foremost among them, the supposed opticality of visual media.³⁹ As a response to these conditions, W.J.T. Mitchell, adapting the Nietzschean metaphor of "sounding the idols" with a philosophical hammer,

37 P. Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 336.

38 "The manner in which human perception is organised – the Medium in which it occurs – is conditioned not only by nature but by historical circumstances as well." (W. Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", *Illuminations*, 222).

39 R. Krauss, *Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*, 31.

offers a new and improved audio-tactile tool of critical practice: not a destructive, or deconstructive hammer, wielded against the idolised objects of criticism and theory, but a tuning fork capable of striking embodied visual and literary images, as well as the theoretical discourses brought to them, “with just enough force to make them resonate”.⁴⁰

14. In the field of ecocriticism, audio-tactile modes of listening become a paradigmatic mode of aesthetic perception to the resonances of an otherwise silenced nature, as well as an ethical disposition releasing us from the mastery of possession.⁴¹ Articulating this position in words that make strange familiars of media theorists and ecocritics, David Abram insists that, “[i]t is only through a mode of listening that we can begin to sense” and to participate in the “wild exchange” — or “discursive chaos” — produced by the heterogeneous ecosystem of diverse life-forms and things in our “more than human” world.⁴² This world, “a listening, speaking world”, is one of multi-media animism, where trees, non-human animals, rivers, and mountains address us with sounds, images and speech, and we respond “to the eloquence of certain buildings and boulders”.⁴³ For Abram, we may have forgotten the animism of indigenous peoples who attend to the “articulate speech of trees or mountains”, to visions of a “Zuni elder [who] focuses her eyes upon a cactus and hears the cactus begin to speak”.⁴⁴ This is because we have adapted this animate interplay to another medium: just as “nonhuman animals, plants and even ‘inanimate’ rivers once spoke to our tribal ancestors, so the ‘inert’ letters on the page now speak to us! [...] We hear spoken words, witness strange scenes or visions, even experience other lives”.⁴⁵ The constitutive intermediality of literature, in other words, is a renewed locus for multimedia animism.

15. Ultimately, under these combined political, philosophical, and material-aesthetic pressures, attention turned towards the ontological status not only of other people, and things in the world, but also towards that Other previously relegated to the status of object, namely, literature. No longer luminous reflector or container of the light of truth, or empty, illusory shadow-system of signs, literature, now freed of “metaphysical backlighting”, is released into the darkness of immersion in the chaotic heterogeneity of mechanical and organic ecosystems, an other as resonant medium or sounding body to which an ethical relation of attunement must be cultivated. Revising Menand, the new critical claim of the 21st century becomes not that “literature is written by people, that it affects

40 W.J.T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want*, 9. Cf. also W.J.T. Mitchell, et. al., *Image and Narrative*.

41 Cf. B. Duvall, G. Sessions, *Deep Ecology*, 188 and C. Manes, “Nature and Silence”, 16.

42 D. Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous World*, 57.

43 *Ibid.*, 57.

44 *Ibid.*, 58.

45 *Ibid.*, 83.

people”, but also that literature is people too.

21st Century Mutations: Playing a New Tune

16. In the 21st century, the metaphors now accompanying our encounter with literature tend toward the anthropomorphic, and literature takes on the ontological status of a personal trainer and strange new friend. Literature offers not only resistance training against the dominant demands of real-world weight — as the “discourse of exception”,⁴⁶ where the “as if [...] of new relationships are put into play”.⁴⁷ If given the space and time of “close, slow reading”, literature may begin to “talk back”,⁴⁸ whether still in the inarticulate murmurs and stutters of Deleuze, in the quiet resonances of Heideggerian-tinged moods or atmospheres,⁴⁹ or in the hortatory Nietzschean tones of Sloterdijk’s ventriloquism of Rilke, “You must change your life!”⁵⁰ In each case, against both traditional literary hermeneutics and post-structuralist positions that still haunt critical practices and pedagogy, works of literature are no longer passive objects awaiting illumination, resonant depth perception of shadowy echoes in the interstices of discursive systems, or deconstruction by the masters of Theory. Re-animated by the electrodynamic energies of Media theorists, literature not only reassumes its place as one technological medium among others. As a psycho-sensory “extension of man”, a “prosthesis of agency”, and mediator of human relations, literature takes on the ontological status of a virtual, surrogate self.⁵¹ Having absorbed the animist energies of the Ecocritics, and the New Materialist “thing” theorists, literature becomes an animate, desiring, “thinking” thing that addresses us, fascinates us, and acts upon us.⁵² Having metabolised the “social energies” of the New Historicists,⁵³ as well as “visceral energies *other than* conscious knowing” of the Affect theorists,⁵⁴ literary texts now become “living” agencies at critical turning points in human affairs and human experience.⁵⁵ What role then does literature (and we as critical readers) have now, at a time when, as Harcourt insists “our politics, our world, our very earth, are in critical condition [...] yet critical

46 M. Perloff, publisher’s blurb, R. Berman, *Fiction Sets You Free*.

47 J. Berman, *Modernist Commitments*, 18.

48 M. Bal, *Double Exposures*, 178; *Travelling Concepts of the Humanities*, 180.

49 H. Gumbrecht, *Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung*.

50 P. Sloterdijk, *You Must Change Your Life!*

51 Cf. K. Hayles, *Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Informatics*, 2.

52 Cf. M. Ball, *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities*, 10; see also B. Brown, “Thing Theory”, and B. Brown, *Other Things*.

53 Cf. S. Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations*, 20.

54 G. Seigworth and M. Gregg, “An Inventory of Shimmers”, 1.

55 Cf. W.J.T. Mitchell, *Image and Narrative* and “The Surplus Value of Images”.

theory is missing in action”?⁵⁶

17. By way of responding to this question, I'd like now to return to Sloterdijk and Morton to explore the possibility that rather than having little to offer, critical theory has turned into critical praxis, where we turn to literature, and to what was called theory, for training in how to engage with real human and non-human others or how not to, as well as for exercise in the “skilled discipline and relaxed play” necessary “to be and remain human”.⁵⁷ This human, for both Sloterdijk and Morton, is not the disembodied human subject of Enlightenment reason, the modernist humanist who sits inside his living room reading a book under the lamp of Reason, dreaming of Truth and Nature, or the deconstructive master of Theory who wanders through shadowy interstitial spaces listening for faults in the structure. Rather, it is the post-human human, a new *homo ludens*, an “intelligent body” (Sloterdijk), or an “assemblage of things” of “lungs and bacterial microbiomes and thoughts” (Morton), capable of engaging in serious play with the dark side of materially embodied existence, with “all kinds of beings, from toxic waste to sea snails”.⁵⁸ This being-in-the-world as a being-with-others is always situated in an inside that opens to a shared outside in another inside: whether reading in the living room or in the basement inspecting cracks in the foundation, in an apartment bathroom or an air-conditioned museum, in a garden or shopping centre, a forest or parking lot — in all these microspheres, we are always already inside the fragile, enveloping macrosphere of the earth's atmosphere. Sloterdijk's notion of “shared isolation” might be said to favour the inside that opens to a shared outside of apartment bathrooms. Here, unlike the “intellectual heads” of Enlightenment reason whose “eyes serve only as tools for reading”, whose “cynical gaze” treats things only as phenomena to penetrate and information to classify and “to which borders and possessions mean a lot”, Sloterdijk locates the “somatic propaedeutic” to praxis and theory as that which “seems doomed to spend its life in the dark”: namely, “the arse”, “at home on toilets all over the world.”⁵⁹ In this situation, the “grand act of ecology in the history of ideas” would be to “recognise our responsibility for what is unintended”, in particular, the consequences of “the human being as hyper-productive shit-producing industry animal”.⁶⁰ Morton's post-human human, as in the scene of writing that opens *Ecology without Nature*, may sit in a suburban study, where “a digital camera rests silently on a copy of an anthology of Romantic poetry”, writing while “an ant crawls down my computer screen”, and inhaling the smell of freshly mown grass. For Morton, a playfully

56 B. Harcourt, *Critique and Praxis*, 11, 12.

57 P. Sloterdijk, *You Must Change Your Life!* 10.

58 P. Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 109; Morton, *Ecology without Nature*, 17.

59 P. Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 147.

60 *Ibid.*, 149.

serious eco-critical disposition would be to “listen to a coke bottle rather than treating it sadistically as silent plastic”,⁶¹ and “follow the waste down the toilet and out into the sewer and the ocean”, just as criticism should “relate the poem to its real and figurative environments”.⁶² For both Sloterdijk and Morton, then, philosophy and Romantic poetry, coke, ants, sea snails, shit and toxic waste, the air we breathe, the water in toilets and oceans, the light and heat of computer screens and the sun, are all matters for serious play and grave concern, all entangled as forms of being-in-the-world as being-with-others on what Sloterdijk calls “the life-support system of space-ship earth”.⁶³ For both, literature plays a fundamental role in training us to encounter what Benjamin called the “perplexity”, and Morton the “weirdness”, of this (post-human) human condition.

18. Sloterdijk, in the language of anthropotechnics, theorises the human as a “sophisticated, cooperative subject that plays with itself and that forms itself in contact with complex texts and over-complex contexts”.⁶⁴ Unlike the cybernetic theory that sometimes colours his language, however, in Sloterdijk’s writing, the ontology of literature is not reduced to a data storage and information processing device. Rather, as a complex textual thing in intimate relation to other things, literature offers training in “a form of befriending through the medium of writing”.⁶⁵ As such, Sloterdijk’s writing allows literature to befriend other entities, crossing disciplinary borders between philosophy and literature, argument and narrative, and establishing connections of “shared isolation”, between heterogeneous works of art and thought, historical situations and cultural atmospheres. Sloterdijk names the critical position for this relationship of indisciplinary “explicitation”: making manifest that which otherwise had been latent in the unfolding and refolding of physical and symbolic forms in topologies of exercise that disorient and reorient our self-position as a subject in relation to ourselves, objects and the world. Thus, in “Foam City”, a chapter from Sloterdijk’s *Spheres Trilogy*, the “world-inner-space” of Rilke’s poetry⁶⁶ brushes up against Benjamin’s *Passagenwerke*, descriptions of the Situationist Internationale *New Babylon* and Californian shopping malls, photographs of women’s apartments in Japan, and architects Liz Diller & Ricardo Scofidio’s *Blur Building* for the Swiss exposition of 2002. All of these articulations of space, atmospheres, and environments answer the question “where are we” in contemporary modernity by making explicit our situation of shared isolation in biotopic macro-interiors,

61 T. Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 33.

62 T. Morton, *Ecology without Nature*, 130.

63 P. Sloterdijk, *Spheres III: Foams*, 302.

64 P. Sloterdijk, cited in Van Tuinen, “Transgenous Philosophy”, 65.

65 P. Sloterdijk, cited in W. Schinkel, E. Noordegraaf-Eeelens, “Peter Sloterdijk’s Spherological Acrobatics”, 9.

66 “Durch alle Wesen reicht der eine Raum: /Weltinnenraum” “the same space spreads through all existences:/ world-inner-space” R.M. Rilke, *Uncollected Poems 1912-1922*, cited in Sloterdijk, *Foams*, 586.

explicitated as ludic “training exercises for climate catastrophe”.⁶⁷ If literature and art offer a special kind of resistance training, it is not for cultural critique or Critical Theory. Rather, literature and art offer training in a special kind of being-in-the-world as resistance training against our current modernity’s constant mobilisation, action and production, which is “modernity as being towards movement, in other words being towards auto-annihilation”.⁶⁸ Sloterdijk thus describes encounters with literature and art, our newly befriended personal trainers, as “[e]xercise in captivating the divided and divisive self through the experience of undivided, intense presence”, an adaptation of Heideggerian “letting be”, an aesthetic and ethical disposition of active, focused attention Sloterdijk associates with “listening as an immobile state of sheer receptivity”.⁶⁹ Going beyond the “outworn old European duality between theory and practice”, literature and theory both offer training in “acting with restraint, intervening out of meditation, guiding processes by letting things happen, and revolutionary calm”.⁷⁰

19. For Morton, whose friendly affiliation with revolutionary movements such as Romantic poetry and Marxist Critical Theory runs throughout his works, the Heideggerian-tinged Euro-Taoism of Sloterdijk’s meditative exercise training seems a little too low-key, a theoretical exercise pose assumed by someone who never bothers to go to the gym and practice heavy lifting. In *Ecology Without Nature*, the apparent targets of Morton’s critique of the pose of “meditative listening” seem to be Deep Ecology Nature writers, and their advocacy of slow, close-reading as “a kind of anti-race toward an aesthetic state of meditative calm that could then (falsely) be associated with some sort of ‘ecological awareness’”.⁷¹ As Morton makes clear, it is in part to counter eco-critical organicism and Nature worship, and “to make strange the idea of environment”, that concepts drawn from new, electronic multi-media ecosystems inform his project for an Ambient poetics. Terms such as “rendering” are borrowed from the technical process of assembling edited cuts of audio-visual source material in the cinematic creation of virtual reality atmospheres. The “medial”, the “Aeolian”, and the “timbral”, all have to do with how literature and art “encode”, “pick up the vibrations of a material universe and record them with high-fidelity” in ways that draw us into their “magnetic field”.⁷² In *Dark Ecology*, however, Morton goes further in addressing what seems like a direct attack on Sloterdijk’s brand of Heideggerian Euro-Taoism, when he critiques “theory [that]

67 P. Sloterdijk, *Foams*, 592.

68 P. Sloterdijk, *Infinite Mobilization*, 28.

69 P. Sloterdijk, *The Aesthetic Imperative*, 297.

70 *Ibid.*, 302.

71 T. Morton, *Ecology Without Nature*, 15.

72 *Ibid.*, 4; 55.

itself becomes an aesthetic pose, evoking an idea of ‘listening’ quasi-contemplatively; talking about Zen, referencing meditation while not actually going to the trouble of doing any”.⁷³ Morton’s notion of praxis, however, whereby “reflection can be a form of action; and action — such as a nonviolent protest — can be theoretical, reflexive”⁷⁴ resonates with Sloterdijk’s “intervening out of meditation”, and “acting with restraint”. So too does Morton’s critical interdisciplinarity resemble that of Sloterdijk, in the way that he makes strange familiars of heterogeneous works by situating them in new environments, with the critical heavy-lifting done by description of these new relations, rather than slow, close-reading analysis. Thus, works of poetry (Wordsworth and Baudelaire, rather than Rilke) brush up against multi-media works. Wordsworth’s “There Was A Boy”, for example, hangs (out) listening⁷⁵ with Alvin Lucier’s video work “I am sitting in a room”, (1970) as examples of the ambient poetics of the Aeolian, manifesting the ways by which echo and repetition bring latent background “phenomena” (hooting owls, looped recordings of voices) to the foreground such that we no longer distinguish “phenomena”, “background” or “foreground”, all of which dissolve into an enveloping, ungraspable ambience. Baudelaire’s prose poem, “Spleen”, becomes animated with an uncanny afterlife when described as “sensual Romantic poetry left in the refrigerator too long and blooming with mold”, where the narrating poet, surrounded and permeated by other natural, unnatural, supernatural beings, becomes “an abject ecosystem”.⁷⁶ Adapting Adorno, Morton describes our encounter with literature as a kind of training in “weird attunement”, where the vibrational rhythms of the ambience created by a poem produce an “aesthetic shudder [that] cancels the distance held by the subject”,⁷⁷ and the poem acts upon us, touches us, comes alive “as if I hear the thing breathing right next to me”.⁷⁸ In *Dark Ecology*, Morton moves us along a “dark pathway” from the dark nihilism and depression of recognizing ecological catastrophe, to the dark mysteries of co-existence with fragile, finite things “suffused and surrounded with clouds of unknowing”,⁷⁹ to the critical disposition of homo ludens, “dark and sweet like chocolate”,⁸⁰ involving joyous, weird laughter accompanying “uncanny awareness of the nonhuman installed at profound levels of the human”.⁸¹ Here, mushroom clouds are replaced by artist Jae Rhim Lee’s

73 T. Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 116.

74 *Ibid.*, 122.

75 The lines from Wordsworth’s “There was a Boy” are “Then, sometimes, in that silence, while he hung /Listening, a gentle shock of mild surprise”. T. Morton quotes the poem in its entirety, *Ecology Without Nature*, 73.

76 T. Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 150.

77 *Ibid.*, 75.

78 *Ibid.*, 150.

79 *Ibid.*, 6.

80 *Ibid.*, 117.

81 *Ibid.*, 159.

Mushroom Burial Suit,⁸² which trains us to accept death and decomposition by offering environmentally friendly burial shrouds infused with mushroom spores trained to enjoy eating our own fleshly material which, along with mercury and other heavy metals, is metabolized in two days.

20. The reading and writing of both literature and theory may still be a “technique of trouble and perplexity” allowing us to attend to the insoluble predicaments of modern existence, a position attributed to Benjamin.⁸³ However, these works of 21st century theory attest to a renascent playfulness emerging from the shadows of melancholy troubling the critical mood of the past decades. While we still live in dark times, as the renewed urgency of recent calls for action testify to, recent works by Sloterdijk and Morton suggest that literature and theory as anthropotechnic training in “skilled discipline and relaxed play” and in “weird attunement”, may not illuminate the darkness, but may allow us to listen to a new tune.

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82 *Ibid.*, 162.

83 R. Alter, “On Walter Benjamin”.

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