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We do not know what a body of theory can do: Romanticism in the Pandemic

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We can think abstractly about the world only to the degree to which the world itself has already become abstract.

--Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (66).

The deadly pandemic conditions demand a radical reconsideration of all forms of critical investigation—not only immunology, demography, epidemiology, and health studies, but also practices of knowledge that address the braided futures of racial justice, global capital, climate change, and the public good amid the predations of fast and slow violence. As I teach my classes through the aperture of a tiny camera, the future of the humanities and of speculative thinking or “theory” also feels profoundly at stake. Yet as a researcher and educator whose focus is the inexhaustible legacy of literature, culture, philosophy, and theory around 1800, I often feel strangely immobilized. As I have admitted to my struggling and alienated students, on screen I may look like I know what I am doing, but it only appears that way. I am mostly groping in the dark, to recall something Freud says when he thinks about the death-drive, reminding us that making little or no headway may be the only way to do justice to certain intense and difficult questions, especially questions concerning *la vie la mort*.¹ Never have I more acutely felt the torsions rippling through Jacques Derrida’s injunction, “Take your time, but be quick about it because you do not know what awaits you” (“The University” 237). Yet I am also learning something from this mood of expectant stasis, and to recognize what an unearned gift it is to be in a position to shelter a space for a form of thinking whose indolence, despondence, and *désœuvrement* I recognize to be paradigmatically Romantic. To be sure, different communities are differently enduring conditions of extraordinary agony, loss, and uncertainty, but my hope is that this wounding precariousness doesn’t mean that colleagues react to the current conditions by reaching too quickly for certitude, thereby abandoning a Romantic predilection for not-knowing and non-knowledge that is inseparable from the open-ended labor of professing the humanities.

Arundhati Roy tells us that the COVID-19 moment is “a portal, a gateway between one world and the next.” One hardly need to add that, as Achille Mbembe notes, “many will not pass through the eye of the needle.” And those who make the journey do so not *alongside* others who do not, but *because* they do not, passing *through* and passing *away* now such deeply adjacent phenomena, the privilege of immunized life so entangled with preventable death and with the lives of those who have been left to die. But I embrace Roy’s claim because it is as much an invitation to consider the possibilities of the threshold as it is a summons to make the crossing. In that spirit, let us resist the temptation as thinkers dedicated to the exploratory energies of critique too hurriedly to traverse this verge, as if claiming to know in advance what lies or should lie on the other side. I say this while also fully acknowledging the importance of never losing sight of what must await us on the far shore. If there is to be a world-to-come, let there be health, yes, and an alleviation of the myriad forms of suffering that the virus has unevenly inflicted; let there be

the abolition of the cruel racisms and structural inequalities that the pandemic exacerbates but whose miserable origins lie in the global system of slavery that was perfected during the time of William Blake and Mary Wollstonecraft and Olaudah Equiano. Let there be an end to the world—that is, an end to the unsustainable and unsustaining illusion of living and dying in a single world that provides so little to so many. Let there be an end to every end of history.

But what a theoretically inflected humanities will look like once it has made this perilous passage—assuming that it makes it at all—is for me much less certain and may in fact be carefully indifferent to certainty. In the midst of the HIV/AIDS pandemic—which remains a pressing concern, with well more than thirty million deaths to date—Paula A. Treichler’s *How to Have Theory in an Epidemic* (1999) was taken up as an exemplary defense of thinking critically about the experiences, representations, and understandings of HIV and AIDS. For Treichler the secreted deaths and ungrieved losses of the pandemic, not to mention what she so memorably calls “the epidemic of signification” thrown off by HIV/AIDS, made sustained critique a mandatory part of learning to live with a virus for which, after all, there is still no vaccine and that has always disproportionately affected marginalized communities. Contrast that affirmation of theory with some of the vocal disavowals of critique heard now, when we see a surge in a summary decisionism that denounces what is called “theory” to be useless and distracting, if not dangerous. How *not* to have theory in a pandemic is too often the order of the day. Ground zero for this denegating gesture is the reaction to Giorgio Agamben’s brief, programmatic, and journalistic remarks about the crisis, now already collected and translated in a volume entitled *Where are we now? The Epidemic and Politics*.² What can it mean, he asks, if in his own impatient, brittle, and anxious way, to survive for more—or other— survival’s stake?

What interests me here is less the questionable persuasiveness of some Agamben’s claims—including his criticism of the Italian government’s “techno-medical-despotism,” and his unapologetic dismay that the requirements of the lock-down augured either a new state of exception or the intensification of an already existing one. Much more revealing is the *Schadenfreude* and the level of outrage that Agamben’s observations have triggered, up to and including the denunciation of his entire biopolitical project. “Forget about Agamben,” Sergio Benvenuto proclaims, perhaps recalling the manly bluster of Baudrillard’s command, made many years ago, to no avail, to “Forget Foucault.” Daniel Lorenzini makes a helpful point when he calls for thinkers to refuse what he calls—choosing instead to remember Foucault—“the blackmail of biopolitics.” “We do not have to be ‘for’ or ‘against’ it (whatever that would mean),” Lorenzini argues, “but address it as a historical event that still defines, at least in part, the way in which we are governed, the way in which we think about politics and ourselves.” In that spirit, I might ask then why Agamben has so rapidly become a metonym for the putative failings of theory, why we find ourselves being told to choose not only between biopolitics or not, but also between what is too quickly glossed as “theory” or not. Agamben’s “coronavirus cluelessness,” Anastasia Berg says in the *Chronicle*, is “symptomatic of theory’s collapse into paranoia.” “Stop fucking around with theory,” Joshua Clover announces with virile confidence in the pages of *Critical Inquiry*, no less, preferring, from a position of considerable professional authority, to compel rather than invite consent. This immune or perhaps autoimmune gesture has spread virally through elements of the scholarly community, leading thinkers to disavow *tout court* the risky gesture of thinking aloud about the topical as an always already abstractable matter rather than as an ethical substratum beyond which no further contemplation is required or permissible: “It would be obscene and unethical to theorize about the epidemiological catastrophe that is unfolding under our very eyes,” Rosi Braidotti writes; “This is not a time for grandiose theorizing.” Professing cultural critique was once treated as “the weak link” in the war on terror; now it is characterized as the chink in the armor in the war against the virus.

Whence comes this moralizing panic regarding the putative immodesty of theory, its embarrassing untimeliness and inertness? Of what contagion is this reaction a neuralgic symptom? Why do “practitioners,” or whoever is imagined to be the antithesis of “theorists,” assume that theory is theirs to know and claim with such confidence? And who but the more vulnerable members of the profession—graduate students, new or precariously employed scholars---most feel the force of this kind of authorized

interdiction? The felt vehemence of these sorts of remarks suggest that they allegorically register and obscure the ferocious operation of an *other* scene, one with much higher stakes: perhaps these prohibitions express frustration and anger in the face of the inability and inactions of the biosecurity state, which, after all, knew plenty about the sharply increased prospect of the appearance of novel viruses and zoonotic organisms in a fast warming planet, and which had run multiple simulations to test the robustness of public health policies and practices. And yet the liberal democratic state proved unable to act credibly and competently on that knowledge in a way that mitigated much more of the suffering and death now taking place all around us. –Unless, of course, the problem in this instance is not the inability to translate theory into action, but the unwillingness of the biosecurity state to abolish its commitments to racialized violence and the letting die of those deemed not to matter. The peculiar novelty of the novel virus is that we knew it was coming and yet it arrived as a cruel and overwhelming surprise. My point is that this crisis of the relationship between thought and action, knowing and doing, may be expressing itself in the words of our impatient and exasperated colleagues: their astringent securitization of theory, in other words, is a symptom of the frustration of living in a world in which the connection between public health knowledge and the state apparatuses, as between theory and practice, is hopelessly and lethally sundered.

Yet these questions all sound uncannily familiar because, since long before the pandemic, theory has been the subject of scolding disciplinary measures—always too foreign, somehow at once scarily communicable and maddeningly incommunicable, both catching and perversely out of touch. To a Romanticist, jettisoning theory in favour of the unassailability of practice feels like *déjà lu* all over again, as if the labor of slandering Percy Bysshe Shelley (the infamous “ineffectual angel”), and with him, all that is deemed to be self-indulgent and profligate, or the compulsion to disavow the impractical and careless theoreticism of the French Revolution, is never complete. After Romanticism, it seems, there is no having done with theory, and there is no having done with the refined pleasures of having done either. Charging theory with the crime of abstraction and immorality has had a storied career, extending through the 1980s, when the name “Paul de Man” was weaponized as metonym for all that was wrong with a “deconstructionism” whose roots and collaborators, it was suspected, lay, respectively, in Romanticism and with Romanticists. When the previous President of the MLA went so far as to blame Trumpism on the pernicious influence of de Man, you start to understand that the origins of the animus towards critique lie too deep for tears.³ My point is that if the humanities are indeed passing through a portal, then among the many things to be changed *in medias res* is the anxiously reiterative sifting of theory from its more practical and productive and less obscene others. Adorno forcefully makes this very point in 1969, another historical flexion point, in a programmatic piece entitled “Resignation.” Adorno’s essay is bracing to read today: his unapologetic call for what he describes as “untrammelled thought” and for “open thinking [that] points beyond itself;” his observation that the quarantining of thought or what he calls “the malicious derision of critical critique” in the name of protecting “the primacy of practice” springs mainly from an “anxiety” of confinement: “People locked in desperately want to get out,” he writes. Adorno points out that, in any case, speculative thinking has a habit of haunting those who would conjure it away: “Something of it survives,” he writes, sounding positively Derridean: “Its return is that of a ghost.” No wonder practitioners are so vehement, as if the sheer force of the spell of their words could exorcize the spectre of theory. It’s worth noting that Adorno’s call for more circumspection regarding the nexus of critique and action is written in the tradition of Kant’s snappy essay, “On the common saying: That may be correct in theory but it is of no use in practice,”⁴ published in 1793, the year of the start of the Reign of Terror. It is also the year of the “American plague,” as it was then called—that is, the deadly outbreak of “yellow fever” in Philadelphia that claimed one in ten of the city’s denizens, disproportionately persons of color. The Prussian philosopher—who, interestingly, opposed inoculations--knew a thing or two about the perilous position of theory and critique under duress and amid the emergency measures for which wartime in particular calls or is said to call. Late in his career, Kant jokes that his “ineffectual ideas” about peaceableness will be easily dismissed as so much dreamy and unworkable nonsense.⁵ Writing in the mode of a perpetual peace project, he deliberately adopts the genre that was in his day most closely

associated with the clueless irrelevance of philosophy, especially philosophy that gave itself to think untrammelled thoughts that are not sutured to things as they are and to what we know or will know. But Kant is winking at his readership: it was the “sorry comforters” preaching *realpolitik* who were in fact the dreamers, nourishing fantasies of a completely administered world, and legitimizing what Adorno calls “the repressive intolerance to thought that is not immediately accompanied by instructions for action” (290).⁶

My question after Kant is whether or in what way will theory survive the current war. Is it to be barred passage through the portal of the present because deemed to be an unwanted parasite on what is proclaimed to be “real,” “practical,” and thus irrefutably true? If theory is meant to survive, I would argue, it will be in the mode of *survivance*, a living-on that is in the service of neither death nor life (including the demise or flourishing of a field, Romanticism, for example), i.e., suspended between worlds rather than compelled to perish in one world or thrive only as praxis in the next.⁷ A ghost, after all, is not nothing, especially not in lands as haunted as ours. More: It is not the impracticality of theory that is the true source of its inextinguishable trouble, but the deeper scandal of a worklessness, or, as I argue elsewhere, “scarcity,” that is irreducible to either theory or practice, a thinking beside itself that remains otherwise illegible as long as we continue to allow the dyad of theory and practice to police our conversations and to determine ahead of time—as medical anthropologist Martha Lincoln says—“what we are going to remember and what we are going to forget” of COVID-19.⁸ We might consider, for example, the telling ways in which discussions of COVID-19 repress discussions of the concurrent and historical HIV/AIDS pandemic, preferring instead to refer to the influenza pandemic of 1918, SARS, and polio as disease precedents of concern. (I use the word, “repress,” advisedly, meaning *remembering* but in the positive mode of forgetting, i.e., the relegation and protective isolation of a memory to the non-place of obliviousness and inconsequentiality. Is it possible that, discursively speaking, optimizing one pandemic, making it “live,” is coupled to the letting die of another? The unruly, finite, and always irreducibly singular AIDS body is made to fade into a “nothing” or “nothingness” from the commanding perspective of a planet reconsolidated as “the world”---rather than, at best, “a world”--in which no place is untouched by COVID-19.) Indeed, it seems more likely for some thinkers to refer to the Black Death or even the plague that befell classical Athens than to remember the proximity of the past and present of HIV and AIDS. The reasons for this amnesia are undoubtedly legion—a forgetting that obscures not only the “other” pandemic’s grievous and grossly uneven toll on particular communities but also the myriad ways in which HIV+ individuals and persons with AIDS formed solidarities, invented novel kinds of activism, and developed practices of care of the self that were unique to the pandemic and yet form a palimpsestic screen through which to parse the current “epidemic of signification”--the object being not to “know” the two catastrophes but to *read* them and to read them through each other. Briefly, what I think is happening in the forgetting of HIV/AIDS amid COVID-19 is the cancellation of the possibilities of thinking the solitude of the two pandemics (which in truth are many more than two) *together*. What I think is troubling is that we are in fact differently living both pandemics in one, variegated time, but not necessarily *making* or *taking* time for thinking theoretically about the “thatness” of that turbulent and still-unfolding and never-to-be-resolved co-existence. Erasing HIV/AIDS is not forgetting the earlier and ongoing pandemic, although that is also certainly happening, but the dissolution of any chance for thinking the rapport *between* the pandemics, i.e., tarrying speculatively—meaning, without irritably reaching after comparisons and analogies, especially comparisons and analogies that render one pandemic illegible and the other worthy of legibility—with what John Paul Ricco calls “the space of separation” that at once joins and divides one thought of the virus from the other. It is that space and the singularity of each pandemic, the ways in which they must co-exist that is missing when we do not talk and think theoretically *today* about HIV/AIDS. In other words, what remains forgotten is not or not only HIV/AIDS but the *relation without relation* that holds these phenomena apart and that affixes them in their shared apartness. As Ricco has argued, we hardly allow ourselves to think the inappropriable space of separation that is the condition of the possibility of the ethical amid the pressures of COVID-19 to optimize and to shelter life and to think of the human as reducible to that optimized life—i.e., as administrable, repairable,

and legible to power. So it stands to reason that tarrying with an ethical opening that honors the exposed singularity and the being-in-common of the two pandemics can be made to feel like a bridge too far. It is that impotentiality, that inoperativity, that is perhaps most difficult to think and to endure, and perhaps never more so in an environment in which the call to operativity and to action is loudest. HIV/AIDS is in some sense imagined to have ended so that the "next" pandemic could take its place and assume the crown of diseases ("corona" is of course Latin for "crown"). Abolishing the chance of tarrying with the uncertainty of the virus, which would include pausing the very idea of "before" and "after," a certain sovereign "human" reasserts itself as "he" who decides when we exit and enter viral worlds, and on what terms, eschewing the possibility of dwelling in the inoperative inter-mundia that rejects the very possibility of a world, much less one world following another.⁹

Alain Badiou argues that the pandemic demands "new figures of politics." Those figures include gestures that are, like Kant's reflective judgment, not in possession of their own concept and that refuse the imperative for thinking always and everywhere to be productive, actionable, resigned, or salvific. These would be Romantic figures, in other words, and new in the sense of never getting old. For if Romanticism has taught me anything it is that we do not know what a body of theory can do.

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¹ See Freud (45). In his 1975-76 seminars, *Life Death [La vie la mort]*, Derrida discusses the significance of this limping hesitancy, hidden, as it were, in plain sight, in the narrative deflections of Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (219-259).

² Agamben’s original remarks (“The state of exception provoked by an unmotivated emergency” and “Clarifications” as well as subsequent discussion in the Italian online journal *antinomie*—with contributions by Jean-Luc Nancy, Sergio Benvenuto and Roberto Esposito, among others—are collected on the website of the *The European Journal of Psychoanalysis*. See “Coronavirus and Philosophers,” <https://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/coronavirus-and-philosophers/> and “On Pandemics. Nancy, Dwivedi, Mohan, Esposito, Nancy, Ronchi,” <https://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/on-pandemics-nancy-esposito-nancy/>

³ See Taylor.

⁴ For an extremely generative discussion of the relevance of Adorno’s essay, “Resignation,” for reading Shelley and Romanticism, see Chapter 5 (“*Prometheus Unbound* and Commemorative Thought”) in Wang’s forthcoming book, *Techno-Magism: Media, Mediation, and the Cut of Romanticism*.

⁵ In the opening paragraph of *Toward Perpetual Peace*, Kant ironically mocks philosophers “who dream that sweet dream” of peaceableness: “[T]he practical politician takes the stance of looking down with great self-satisfaction on the theoretical politician as an academic who, with his ineffectual ideas, poses no danger to the state” (317).

⁶ Positioning himself as a Job figure, Kant describes preeminent thinkers like Grotius, Pufendorf, and Vattel as “sorry comforters” for justifying a political life that is founded upon power rather than right. See *Toward Perpetual Peace* 326.

⁷ Derrida writes about *survivance* at various points in his work, but perhaps nowhere more pointedly than in *The Beast and the Sovereign Volume II*. As Derrida argues, “Survivance in a sense of survival that is neither life nor death pure and simple, a sense that is not thinkable on the basis of the opposition between life and death, a survival that is not, in spite of the apparent grammar of the formation of the word (*überleben* or *fortleben*, living on or to survive, survival), [that is not] above life, like something sovereign (superanus) can be above everything, a survival that is not more alive, nor indeed less alive, or more or less dead than death, a survivance that lends itself to neither comparative nor superlative, a survivance or a surviving (but I prefer the middle voice ‘survivance’ to the active voice of the active infinite ‘to survive’ . . .)” (*The Beast and the Sovereign* [130–1]).

⁸ In “Goya’s Scarcity” I argue that the Spanish artist’s assemblage, *The Disasters of War*, makes trouble for us precisely because of their complex ineffectuality or inoperativity. See too Jacques Khalip’s compelling examination of the coils and recoils of dwelling disastrously amid “lastness” in Romanticism and its aftermaths. My thinking about inoperativity specifically amid the pandemic has been hugely activated by John Paul Ricco’s illuminating essays, which include: “Isolation, Loneliness, Solitude: The COVID-19 Pandemic Has Brought Us Too Close Together,” and “On Ways of Living in the Midst of the COVID-19 Global Pandemic (Three Brief Meditations),” *Topia: The Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies* (March 2020).

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⁹ I am grateful to Jacques Khalip for helping me formulate this point.