Theory Is Like a Surging Sea

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Theory is like a Surging Sea

*Michael Munro*

§I.

*DICHTUNG UND WAHRHEIT*

Strictly speaking, does not thought—or the act of thinking—always have the capacity for operating like a foreign language?²

~Rey Chow

*Philosophie dürfte man eigentlich nur dichten.* Witt-

genstein’s imperative translates, “very roughly,” “Philosophy ought really to be written only as poetry.”

Yet how is one to approach that directive? How is one to read it—as poetry, or philosophy? If poetry, following Robert Frost, is, precisely, “what gets lost in translation,” how is one to place what’s proposed here? And where does that leave philosophy?

“Poetry may well be ‘what gets lost in translation’,” Craig Dworkin has conceded, “though the phrase should be understood not in the sense of elegiac ruination or privation, but of absorption and reverie—in the way one might be lost in thought.”

Only in poetry lost in thought, as in another language, may philosophy be found.

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3 Ludwig Wittgenstein, quoted in Marjorie Perloff, “‘Literature’ in the Expanded Field,” in Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism, ed. Charles Bernheimer (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 184 [175–186]. Thomas Basbøll has noted that the Austrian’s dictum “means, somewhat less elegantly than the German, that ‘one ought really to do philosophy as poetry.’ The German word ‘dichten’ is the verb form of ‘Dichtung,’ which means ‘poetry.’ To my knowledge there is no such thing as poeting in English”: Thomas Basbøll, “Epiphany,” The Pangrammaticon, June 18, 2005, http://pangrammaticon.blogspot.com/2005/06/epiphany.html. Basbøll concludes, “In any case, modifying Peter Winch’s translation a bit, we can render this more naturally as, ‘One ought really only to compose philosophy (as one composes poetry).’”

§ Giorgio Agamben contends that “in a philosophical investigation, not only can the *pars destruents* not be separated from the *pars construens*, but the latter coincides completely with the former.” If one can apply to Agamben here another of his methodological principles, the transformation of aporia into euporia, and if it is indeed true, as he writes, that the *pars destruents* and the *pars construens* “completely” coincide, what might it be, instead—in the interest of the least displacement—for the former to wholly coincide with the latter? And how might that transform philosophical investigation?

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