

Eastern Illinois University

From the Selected Works of C. C. Wharram

October, 2014

Nothing Human (invited paper for the special volume "Humanism, Cosmopolitanism, and the Ethics of Translation")

C. C. Wharram, *Eastern Illinois University*



Available at: https://works.bepress.com/charles_wharram/3/

Nothing Human

C. C. Wharram

Abstract

In this essay C. C. Wharram argues that Terence's concept of translation as a form of "contamination" anticipates recent developments in philosophy, ecology, and translation studies. Placing these divergent fields of inquiry into dialogue enables us read Terence's well-known statement "I am a human being — I deem nothing human alien to me" as a recognition of the significance of the "nothing human" for contemporary humanism. By recasting Terence's human/foreign pairing through Freud's concept of the uncanny, Wharram draws a parallel between a "nothing human" that is radically interior to the human subject and an exterior agency of "nothing human" described by actor-network theory and object-oriented ontology. Only through an "alien phenomenology" (a concept borrowed from Ian Bogost) dependent on metaphors and translations that are necessarily approximate (or "contaminated") can we begin to approach this "nothing human."

Part 1: Something of Translation

There is no event or thing in either animate or inanimate nature that does not in some way partake of language, for it is in the nature of each one to communicate.

— Walter Benjamin, "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man" (1916)¹

Terence's famous aphorism "Homo sum: humani nil a me alienum puto" (I am a human being — I deem nothing human alien to me), ripped from the first act of Terence's play *Heauton Timorumenos* (*The Self-Tormentor*) of approximately 163 BCE, presents us with something of an ethical dilemma. Leaving aside the vexed question of translation for a while — but only for a while — Terence's statement seems too general in its sweep when removed from the ironic context in which the character of Chremes speaks these words.² Moreover, as a talisman for humanism (or for a certain brand of humanism at least), Terence's *homo sum* has been construed as universalist rationale for claiming a certain generic equivalence

among humans, voiced in “a tone both elevated and elevating,” but one that may well have offered philosophical ballast for the colonial enterprise of dismissing the differential claims of other humans.³ And, barring critical intervention of some sort, it may continue to be understood as such.

At first glance at least, Terence's *homo sum* appears in addition to leave little room for anything *other* than the human. Our current circumstances, however, demand from us grave concern about the place of things and animals, nonhuman beings and materials, in our world and in our thinking. Certain contemporary thinkers — actor-network theorists, object-oriented ontologists, political ecologists, ecophilosophers, and others — are convinced that, in centering the prevailing modes of Western thought for at least the last 250 years on the human — a period that only recently acquired the moniker “Anthropocene” — we have brought upon ourselves the conditions for serious ecological consequences, for humans and everyone and everything else. While his work should not be understood as representative of the above grouping of contemporary schools, Peter Sloterdijk voices the critique of a “humanism” founded on an anthropocentrism bordering on “fundamentalism”:

The Human: you know what you get with it. Humanism is the fundamentalism of our culture; it is the political religion of globalized western man, who deems himself to be so good and so perspicacious that he readily sees himself imitated everywhere.⁴

Not that *everything* that has been thought and acted upon by the various philosophies of human subjectivity during the Anthropocene has been for total waste or utter ill. Yet something more, or something else, is called for. In the words of political ecologist Jane Bennett, “what is also needed is a cultivated, patient, sensory attentiveness to nonhuman forces operating outside and inside the human body.”⁵

To put the question in another way: do the words “I am a human being — I consider nothing human alien to me” simply call for more anthropocentrism more of the time, or might there be a way to salvage humanism (or at least a form of humanism) from the ruins of the *homo sum*, a humanism that in fact counters a rampant anthropocentrism with something more, or something else? While we

should acknowledge the history of reading Terence's *homo sum* that strikes an overly reverential tone regarding the human, I nevertheless believe we can hear in his simple words something of a duplicitous ring, a call for reconsideration — and perhaps a certain allure. As someone who likes to spend inordinate amounts of time thinking about problems of translation, I find the statement strangely compelling — not that I imagine I might find the *true meaning* of these translated words, but that they might just point to something more interesting, more complicated, and, perhaps, more obliquely cognizable than the putative human universality (or anthropocentric humanism) often attributed to them. I hope, in the pages to come, to approach Terence's *homo sum* as much more than simply an articulation of the philosophical position that has posited the human as the be-all and end-all of progressive thought, as far more than a classical slogan for anthropocentrism. In the end, I hope we can catch a glimpse — or hear the din — of Terence's “nothing human.”

“Nothing,” You Say?

Terence's phrase in its — and I use the term loosely — *original* Latin reads as follows: “Homo sum: humani nil a me alienum puto.” Until very recently, up to the time that Latin faded into the twilight of most Western education systems, Terence was highly regarded as a supreme stylist of the Latin language. Well into the nineteenth century in the Anglophone world, there were many editions of his comedies printed in Latin, often presented with parallel English text on facing pages. Among the many eighteenth-century editions of Terence's work during his Anglophone heyday, a collection of his six comedies (including, of course, the *Heauton Timorumenos*) appeared in 1739 in the form of a Latin primer. John Stirling's compendium, *The Six Comedies of Publius Terence*, offered the pedagogical advantage of

the following Improvements, *viz.*

I. The Words of the Author are placed in their natural and grammatical Order, in the lower Part of the Page.

II. Such Words as supplied by an *Ellipsis*, are omitted, and yet are necessary to make up the Sense.

Our sentence in question, then, appears as “Homo sum: humani nihil à me alienum puto” in the main text, while the subtext presents the sentence beneath the word “ORDO” on this, as every page: “Sum homo: puto nihil humáni *esse* aliénum à me,” *esse* in italics, since the word was *elided* in Terence's original.⁶

The fabulously symptomatic High Enlightenment discourse of “ORDO” — the categorical imperative of methodological arrangement, proper sequencing, and grammatical classification — in conjunction with the age of reason's “cult of improvement” — the advance of individual and national literacy through Latin education, and the improvement of even Terence himself through a syntax both *clara et distincta*⁷ — situates Stirling's text in the specific social and literary context of England's Augustan Age. More importantly, I would like to focus on Stirling's attention to the missing *esse*. That is, what happens when we attend to the missing “to be,” the absent *being* in Terence's famous phrase?

Does the silent *esse* call out for an ontological reading of the famous *homo sum* sentence, asking us to rethink what it might say about the human and the alien, what the status of human is and is not, what the status of the alien is and is not? This rethinking begins not by pretending that *esse* is there, or by arguing that *esse* is not there, but by acknowledging that being — in Terence, in this sentence at least — is there in its absence and not there in its being. In the many English translations of Terence's *homo sum* over the centuries, *being* — in the form of the words “to be” or the word “is” — sometimes appears (“I am human: nothing human *is* alien to me”) and sometimes withdraws (“I am a man and feel for all mankind”).⁸ Being, it seems, twinkles in and out over the historical course of the two-millennia journey from Terence's writing to the present day.

I return to the sentence. “Homo sum: humani nil a me alienum puto.” Leaving aside the (relatively straightforward) opening (“I am human” or “I am a human being”), I want to suggest that the stickiness of the sentence can only be elided if one ignores the ontology of nothing, of *nil*. Putatively, the sentence stakes a claim for a homeyness between individual human (*homo*) and species being (*humani*, “of the human”) through a disavowal of alienness (“nothing human is alien to me”). Simple enough, right?

What we should consider, though, for a moment, is nothing. Consider nothing. That is, after all, what Terence's sentence asks us to do. The verb *puto* (first-person form of *putare*: "to deem" or "to consider") is often, but not always repressed in English translations. To trace the grammatical connections slowly, "I consider" an object, that object being *nil*, "nothing." I consider an object: nothing. But this nothing, I consider "alien." That is, "I consider this nothing [to be] alien to me," *a me alienum*. The nothing, however, has a genitive link to the human, *humani nil*, "of the human nothing" — that is, "I consider nothing of the human." Perhaps I could put it this way: "I consider the nothing human [to be] alien to me."

Assembling — or *reassembling* — the syntax in this way, we discover a sentence that indexes *being* or *beings* or actors actually alien to us.⁹ The "nothing human" foreign to my being, my thinking, my humanness. This sentence abruptly sparkles with strangeness: there is, after all, an object behind the "nothing human." Suddenly, there's a place for the "nothing of the human," the other-than-human, in Terentian humanism. An alien, foreign place, for certain, but at least it's some place.

But this is not all. What if I were to consider the nothing I'm considering to be not a "nothing human" but a "human nothing"? What if there were an object nothing, a "nothing of the human" so excessively deep down in me, so beyond my human faculties to cognize, that it seems alien to me? There's this thing — I don't even know what to call it — an "*it*," *ein Es*, inside me, communicating to me in an alien, in a foreign language. Would the words of Terence, "I am human: I consider the human nothing [to be] alien to me," sound like a precursor to what would come to be called the unconscious? Doesn't Terence's *homo sum* resonate with Sigmund Freud's unconscious *avant la lettre*, when reassembled in *this* way?

We have, then, a lot of nothing. To recapitulate, we have (1) the "nothing human" that represents the absence of anything human that might cause alienation from other humans, the inherited "meaning" of Terence's statement that produces a common bond of human "feeling"; (2) the "nothing human" that indexes a set (of things, beings, actors) that exists alien to my humanity; and (3) the "nothing human" that indexes a deep core of the human being that crosses over into the nonhuman, an alien "thing" internal to my humanity. Or, in other words, we have an excess of nothing. Nothing in excess.

Nil nimis, “nothing in excess”: the words of the proverb inscribed at the temple of Apollo at Delphi; the same words uttered by the very Chremes who voices the famous “*homo sum*” in *The Self-Tormentor*.¹⁰ Chremes’s “*Nil nimis*” is his response to the surprise of his slave Syrus on seeing him “up so early” after he had “drank so much last night.” Syrus — and, it would seem likely, the audience — deems Chremes’s words utterly ironic, as Syrus retorts with “‘*Nil’ narras?*” (“‘Nothing,’ you say?”) and mocks Chremes with an old Greek proverb, to which the nearest English equivalent is “There’s life in the old dog yet.”¹¹ In other words, the “nothing” of Chremes’s “nothing in excess” was most certainly “something.”

The *nil nimis* passage demonstrates that seeing a “something” under erasure behind the “nothing” does not solely rely on a deconstructive reading of the *homo sum* passage. While contemporary English translations will inevitably draw quotation marks around “*nil*” in Syrus’s retort (“‘Nothing,’ you say?”), Terence’s “original” Latin produces the same effect, elevating the word “nothing” into an object of scrutiny. That word you say, *nil*: Are we certain it accurately describes your habits of consumption last evening? Let’s think about that word. *Nil. Puto nil*: “I consider nothing.” Terence, I argue, embeds a “something” behind the word “nothing” in this passage, using the same ironic voice of Chremes that uttered “*homo sum: humani nil a me alienum puto*,” almost begging us to return to the *homo sum* passage for another consideration.

Duplicity, Contamination, and Distortion

Up to this point, however, we have hardly considered Terence’s words as *translated* from the Greek. The status of Terence’s work — not only of *The Self-Tormentor*, but also of his entire oeuvre — may be said to oscillate between an appreciation for his rhetorical style and an admiration for his dramatic originality. Whether Terence is best thought a superior stylist or a profound artistic genius, I would posit, depends largely on whether Terence is deemed a “mere” translator or an “original” playwright. Terence’s prologue addresses this problem in a notoriously slippery passage near its beginning, during which the prologue’s speaker alludes to the “rumours of malicious people” who have alleged that “the playwright has contaminated many Greek plays” (*multas contaminasse Graecas*). The response? “He does not deny that this is so; he does not regret it and he declares that he will do it again.”¹²

The passage has launched a long history of critical inquiry into the veracity of Terence's defense of *contaminatio*. Was Terence forthright in acknowledging that he “contaminated” Menander's play — or might he have been engaging in ironic play? While it is beyond the scope of this essay to offer a sustained overview, we can note that the role and meaning of *contaminatio* in his oeuvre has been a running motif in Terentian criticism.¹³ The presumption behind all the analyses I've encountered, whether they ultimately acknowledge or disavow the principles of *contaminatio*, is that, for Terence to contaminate Menander, he must be engaging in something other than translation. It follows from this presumption that either Terence is doing something utterly derivative of Menander (“just” translating), or he is intentionally altering Menander's text in a way that demonstrates qualities of profound artistic ability.

Perhaps I may best elucidate the chasm between Terence the Translator and Terence the Genius by touching briefly on the scholarly arguments concerning the relationship between Terence's play and its Greek “original.” Emblematic of the Terence the Genius camp, Gilbert Norwood in *The Art of Terence* argues forcefully — and polemically — for the “dramatic greatness of Terence,” and against critical claims that his comedies are “mere translations of the Greek.”¹⁴ Norwood dismisses with contempt the very idea that Terence might be reduced to the meager role of translator: “There can be few freaks in the history of criticism more amazing than that which presents Terence as a kind of ... industrious apprentice who contrived to write charming Latin.”¹⁵ As might be predicted, *contaminatio* indexes Terence's genius: “the notion, at any rate the practice, of *contaminatio* itself is a sign of originality.”¹⁶ Representative of the opposing view, J. C. B. Lowe argues that Terence the Translator essentially inherits Menander's structure and plot without any sort of meaningful transformation (or contamination): “the intrigue of the *Heauton Timorumenos*, for all its complexity, shows a unity of design that argues for a single author, and that was surely Menander, creator of the original plot.”¹⁷

Between these two extreme positions, A. J. Brothers hones in on the difficulty in parsing three early lines of the prologue, the interpretation of which helps to determine a critic's understanding of the “extent of any possible *contaminatio*” in Terence's play.¹⁸ The lines — “Today I am about to perform a fresh comedy from a

fresh Greek play, 'The Self-Tormentor,' a double [*duplex*] play based on a single [*simplici*] plot" — have been read in conjunction (or disjunction) with the *contaminatio* passage.¹⁹ Brothers, after a detailed survey of this critical history, offers a reading that allows for minimal *contaminatio* by suggesting that Terence's intervention was to "double" the Menander original by introducing the female lovers as speaking characters (certainly Bacchis and perhaps Antiphila), characters who were part of the plot, but not part of the dramatic staging in (Brothers's conception of) the Menander original.²⁰

What strikes anyone conversant with contemporary translation theory is that Terence's declaration for the right of a translator to contaminate sounds far less alien than the strict division between the practice of translation and *contaminatio* voiced by his critics over the past two centuries. The figure of *contaminatio* — not to mention his avowal of a "duplex" text — may well be an appropriate supplement for terms and concepts that contemporary translation theorists have used to acknowledge the fact that "there is no communication without translation."²¹ Much criticism in translation studies over the past few decades has worked to demonstrate the error of thinking that translations should (or could) offer a transparent medium into originals. Antoine Berman, Suzanne Jill Levine, Douglas Robinson, Rainer Schulte, and Lawrence Venuti have offered various ways of thinking past the dismissive assumptions that had caused translation to be parceled into a category of derivative or secondary literariness.²² These critics and others began to see the "failure" of translation — that is, its inability to represent the original textual object in anything other than a distorted (or "contaminated") form — as a point of departure for an entirely new critical enterprise.

French philosopher Michel Serres, acknowledged by actor-network theorists for his founding influence, consistently returns in his work to the figure and practice of translation as a means to reconfigure the set of possible relations between the human and the world, and between the different languages humans use to describe the world. Drawing on the insights of information theory, Serres railed against the common misconception that noise is a useless contaminant of any translation, or any instance of communication between two points in a given system. Rather, noise is an absolute necessity in communication because, by definition, if there were no noise between sender and receiver, sender and receiver would be absolutely

identical. That is, no noise equals no difference between points, equals no communication, equals no translation. Noise is an essential and, in fact, *productive* agent in the passage between sender and receiver and, moreover, between discrete scientific and/or social practices. Translation became for Serres the general locus where new associations and relations between fields of knowledge could be explored and discovered. Knowledge, as a result, is intimately connected with the willingness to engage in translation and listen to its “noise.” It follows, then, that the potential transformation inherent in these “passages” or “confluences” between heterogeneous discursive fields in fact offers the possibility of creative, inventive, turbulent, and distributive thinking. In the concept of “noise,” Serres provided an avenue for articulating the means by which translation offers a passage, however distorted, between linguistic systems — a model that he would later extend to account for the knowledge production and the creative energy unleashed when discursive regimes interact, such as that between scientific discourses and aesthetic forms.

Examining closely these “noisy” (or, to use Terentian discourse, “contaminated”) distortions — the twisting, turning, and deforming process that produces one textual object out of another — might tell us something profound about the way we approach *all* textual objects. What translation theorists after Serres, Berman, Levine, Robinson, and Venuti have in common is that they all begin with and foster the understanding that a translation produces something new, a newly created object. But how can we closely examine the contaminations, the distortion, the noise, when we don't have an original? Does Terence present us simply with a difficult (or impossible) task, or is this example a limit case that can tell us something more — dare I use the term? — universal?

Part 2: Nothing of Translation

The transposition that a painter makes reveals something never seen before, something not yet heard, and translates it into the absolute concepts of painting. That is to say, into something other than reality.

— Paul Cézanne²³

There is something uncannily similar between Cézanne's description of the artistic production of a painter as a translation of “something never seen before, something

not yet heard,” and our experience of reading or hearing Terence's *The Self-Tormentor*. We *know* it's a translation, a translation of Menander, but it's a translation of something no one — at least no one in a couple of millennia — has actually seen or heard, a lost play. Yet it reveals something, something beyond itself that exists or existed, something in a translated form, a something other than the reality from which it arose. It indexes that missing object, that thing not there, lost in the ruins of ancient Greece.

Reading Terence's *The Self-Tormentor* is something of an uncanny experience of translation. We know that *The Self-Tormentor* was, at its first performances, posted as having been “taken from the Greek of Menander,” and there is widespread agreement among classicists that at least some of the lines of Menander's homonymous play that have survived to the present day in fragmented form are “preserved” in Terence's version. Terence himself acknowledges the translation, yet also, playfully, claims for himself the role of contaminator, taking the Greek original and infecting it with plot devices foreign to Menander.

There are certainly moments in *The Self-Tormentor* during which Menander's play can be heard, albeit in a distorted fashion. During the first act, for example, Chremes clumsily “disappears into Phania's house and reappears almost immediately,” as the stage directions dictate.²⁴ Editor and translator John Barsby explains, “This momentary vacating of the stage is awkward and unusual. It is likely that in the Greek original there was a divine prologue (omitted by Terence) between Chremes' disappearance and reappearance.”²⁵ Such distortions allow those with expert knowledge, attuned to Greek and Roman culture and dramaturgy, to hear resonances of the Greek within the Terentian Latin, something all good translators of ancient languages must train themselves to do.

Translations of the Past

Much of the literary wealth that we have inherited from antiquity is, in effect and in fact, *translation* — though we may not often think it so. *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, for example, widely recognized as one of the earliest surviving works of literature, comes down to us from the Akkadian language of 1300–1100 BCE, yet we know that the standard Akkadian version is adapted from Sumerian sources, some of which have survived in fragmentary form, a language that had already been extinct

for at least 400 years by the time the Mesopotamian priest Sîn-lēqi-unninni compiled the epic in Akkadian. One of these survivals, a Sumerian poem from about 2100 BCE, “The Death of Bilgames,” tells the tale of the burial of the titular figure, later known as Gilgamesh in Akkadian. Bilgames has his subjects divert the Euphrates River so that his tomb may be constructed beneath the riverbed. He and his entire household are buried alive as the waters of the Euphrates return to their former path.

The poem is fragmentary, fraught with ellipses, teetering on the verge of utter ruin, but it veers from sections of incomprehensibility to others having a strange lucidity. The story, too, is remarkably alienating: as David Damrosch notes, “Few episodes in Mesopotamian literature are more dramatically distant from our modern outlook than this scene.”²⁶ Yet, as Damrosch acknowledges, the poem embeds a “mixture of continuity and discontinuity,” as certain lines of the text “suddenly leap out with a freshness and vivid realism,” such as the unexpected lines describing the bed of the diverted river, suddenly dry:

They breached the Euphrates, they emptied it of water,

Its pebbles gazed on the Sun God in wonder.

Then in the bed of the Euphrates the earth cracked dry.²⁷

The “charming personification of the astonished pebbles” and “novelistic realism of the riverbed's cracking” may lead a modern reader, in Damrosch's formulation, to “feel entirely at home, and yet only a few lines later the beloved senior wife, junior wife, child, and servants are all being buried alive.”²⁸ And what is true of “The Death of Bilgames,” I argue, is globally true of the experience of reading myths of antiquity. Ancient texts offer a means to recognizing both the profound differences between cultures and their uncanny similarities. Such reading allows us, through *translation*, to experience this paradox of human cultures: the radical diversity of ideas, social relations, and expressions that have existed on our planet, along with the capacity to understand these tremendously divergent aspects of culture.

While it is not part of Damrosch's argument, the feeling of readerly "at-home-ness" in tandem with the feeling of cultural and historical alienation — the oscillation between relaxed familiarity and anxious discomfort — accurately indexes Freud's concept of the "uncanny." Freud specifically references the idea of being buried alive as putatively "the most uncanny thing of all" in his 1919 treatise "The Uncanny," transforming, as it does, the phantasy of life in the womb, a phantasy that had originally, of course, "nothing terrifying about it at all."²⁹ What Freud in "The Uncanny" attempts to decipher is the most ancient part of ourselves, both as individuals (the unremembered era of "intra-uterine existence") and as species beings (in Freud's formulation, the *auld lang syne* of "primitive fear," "beliefs," and the "old animistic conception of the universe"), a part so distant it edges toward the "nothing human" that verges on the prehuman, the preconscious, the prelinguistic.³⁰ And whether this phenomenon arises from the radically internal to the individual or the radically distant to the species in time, the means of approaching this radical other is the same: translation.

Already in the case history of "Katerina" in *Studies on Hysteria* (1895), Freud had noted that he "had often compared the symptomatology of hysteria with a pictographic script which has become intelligible after the discovery of a few bilingual inscriptions" (*SE* 2, 129). In his case history of "Dora," Freud equated "the production of a symptom" with "the translation of a purely psychical excitation into physical terms" (*SE* 7, 53). Freud derived his "methods of dream reading" from his recognition that dreams, like symptoms, serve as commentary upon hysterical phobias. In the *Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud posited that "the dream itself is to be treated like a symptom" (*SE* 4, 101). The symptom functions as a manifestation of an internal prompting toward psychic "health," the close scrutiny of which may propel the analysand toward this goal, relieving "illness" of its exclusively negative connotations. The psychoanalyst must *translate* dreams and symptoms: "The productions of the dream-work ... present no greater difficulties to their translators than do the ancient hieroglyphic scripts to those who seek them" (*SE* 5, 341). Freud represented dream analysis and translation as interchangeable terms, commenting that "symbolic" images will be immediately recognized by those having "some practice in the translation [*Übersetzung*] of dreams" (*SE* 5, 397).

We should recall that Freud wrote these analogies between the work of the psychoanalyst and the work of the translator of ancient texts mere decades after

the ancient cultures of Mesopotamia were unearthed and their cuneiform texts deciphered. Yet the nineteenth-century excavations of Mesopotamian antiquity were but a tip of the evolutionary iceberg of humanity. We now know that humans are assembled out of the ruins of history, the mutated strands of DNA that stand on the site of an old evolutionary tale that suggests the “human” part of our genetic narrative is very small indeed in comparison to what we share with other species. In fact, geneticists maintain that “humans share 98% of their genome with chimpanzees, and 35% with daffodils.”³¹ A modern-day Terence could perhaps quip, “I am a human being, and therefore consider only 65% of daffodils foreign to me.” We can even follow the genetic strands back, *way* back, to the distant recesses of speculative biology, to “a strange ‘pre-living’ condition” that Sol Spiegelman calls “RNA World,” as Timothy Morton explains: “In RNA World pieces of what we now call RNA, the molecule that translates DNA for the ribosomes (the enzyme factories in each cell), hitched a ride on a non-organic replicant such as a silicate crystal.”³² Deep down (or way back), there are nonhumans constituting the human, and translator RNA there to make it happen.

Freud, it must be said, was more accurate than he could have known when he staked a claim for the uncanny as a liminal tension often precipitated out of the vexed decidability between the living and the nonliving, the human and the nonhuman. If our genetic coding narrates a tale that is mostly “nothing human,” is it any wonder we are anxious about borderline phenomena? Is it an automaton or a human? Is that an external contingency threatening us, or is it a manifestation of “the primary narcissism which dominates the mind of the child and primitive man”? Is that extreme weather event a random externality, or (gulp) did we make it happen? Uncanny. Entering into an age during which the manifestations of global warming will continually remind us that we indeed have made *it* happen, we — individually and as a species — are already “living the uncanny” in ways that Freud might only have been able to glimpse.

At Home with the Uncanny

In one of the most eloquent calls in recent years for the inclusion — in our political and social considerations — of nonhuman actants, to use Latourian language, Jane Bennett argues that we need less demystification and more estrangement, her own process of which centers on complicating the separation between the living and the

nonliving.³³ She likens her turning “the figures of ‘life’ and ‘matter’ around and around, worrying them until they start to seem strange” to “the way a common word when repeated can become a foreign, nonsense sound.”³⁴ I have attempted in this essay to arouse something similar in the way Terence's *homo sum* can suddenly flash a vivid strangeness when persistently summoned like a Buddhist mantra, a strangeness utterly alien to its putative anthropocentrism. Bennett argues that, “in the space created by this estrangement, a vital materiality can start to take shape,” or rather, as she goes on to explain, *reemerge*, for “a version of this idea already found expression in childhood experiences of a world populated by animate things rather than passive objects.”³⁵ Bennett's aim “to reinvoke this sense” places her work squarely within the realm of Freud's uncanny, a force of thought that attempts to move beyond the limits of human thought and an acknowledgment that nonhumans have always already been actors in making the human.

In addressing the question of how to approach “the agentic contributions of nonhuman forces,” Bennett offers a surprising counter to the rampant anthropocentrism that devalues the nonhuman: anthropomorphism.³⁶ To render something nonhuman using characteristics or expressive possibilities of the human, to anthropomorphize, might sound at first like a withdrawal back into anthropocentric indulgence, yet Bennett makes a strong case for the “whole world of resonances and resemblances” revealed when we abandon the hierarchical perspective of a universal divided into human agents and passive others.³⁷ To anthropomorphize, according to Bennett, is “to relax into resemblances discerned across ontological divides,” a facility that illuminates a “world filled not with ontologically distinct categories of being (subjects and objects) but with variously composed materialities that form confederations.”³⁸ Similarly, bioethicists Marc Bekoff and Jessica Pierce advocate forcefully for anthropomorphism — “identifying commonalities and then using human language to communicate what we observe” — as a necessary part of the process of scientific observation: “There's nothing unscientific about using the same terms to refer to animals and humans, particularly when we're arguing that the same phenomenon is present across species.... Careful anthropomorphism is alive and well, as it should be.”³⁹ While Bennett disavows the potential anthropocentrism of her advocacy of anthropomorphism and Bekoff and Pierce focus their considerations on nonhuman animals, Ian Bogost in *Alien Phenomenology* — another recent meditation on “the

multifarious complexity of being among all things” that rejects a subjective hierarchy culminating in the human — attempts to narrate “what it's like to be a thing,” arriving at the conclusion that “anthropocentrism is unavoidable, at least for us humans.”⁴⁰

But Bogost's brand of anthropocentrism is a far cry from the type he rejects as “overtly, selfishly anthropocentric”: the “correlationism” that constricts being to that which exists only for subjects, that “considers being a problem of [human] access” (*AP*, 29 and 4). Quentin Meillassoux coined the term “correlationism” to describe what he considers to be the dominant mode of Continental philosophies for over 200 years, philosophies that assume “that we can think neither of human without world nor of world without human,” only that there is a correlation or “rapport” between the two.⁴¹ The founding document of correlationism, according to Meillassoux, was Immanuel Kant's first critique of 1781, in which Kant posited the “thing-in-itself.”⁴² We can never know the thing-in-itself, but, since we can posit that it exists in some undefined relation to things as we encounter them, they are thinkable. By disavowing any direct access to things-in-themselves, humans are limited to reflecting on the conditions that allow us to access the world: in Kant, this amounts to describing how minds work, according to principles or regulative procedures that are universal structures of our cognitive faculties.

The exclusive centering of the human–world relation necessarily disavows the agency of nonhumans. Yet nonhuman beings, it must be said, relate to and interact with each other outside of human observation, and without humans thinking them. They are, in the well-known words of William Wordsworth's “Resolution and Independence,” “thing[s] endued with sense,” “not all alive nor dead.” Recently, object-oriented philosophers such as Graham Harman and Levi Bryant have been reading Kant's correlationist model as a gateway into an estranged world of multifarious “correlationisms.” Harman, for example, has made the startling claim that

Kant's notion that we have no direct access to things in themselves was in my opinion right, but he's wrong in limiting it to a special human problem, [that] it's humans ... who are unfortunately unable to grasp the things-in-themselves. I say the same thing happens in causal interaction between

mindless chunks of matter. They too are also not going to unlock all of each other's features, because they're not going to be equipped to do that.⁴³

Bryant has explicated the key role of “translation” as the basic form of relation between any two actors in actor-network theory with recourse to a similar, expansive reading of Kantian things-in-themselves.⁴⁴ When things move, they transform, as Bryant explains:

The phenomenon of transformation through transportation is not restricted to the translation of texts, but is true of *all* ... interactions between objects. Thus when Kant tells us that objects conform to the mind, not the mind to objects, that we can never know things as they are in-themselves, he is absolutely correct with this one qualification: What Kant says of mind-world relations is not unique to mind, but is true of all object-object relations.⁴⁵

Thus, the object-oriented rejection of correlationism “amounts,” as Bogost notes, “to a rejection of only one correlation and an embrace of multiple correlations,” as interactions between nonhumans also result in mutually distorted and contaminated “perceptions” (AP, 80).

How can we begin to approach the experience that nonhumans have in interacting with their worlds? Drawing on Thomas Nagel's well-known essay on “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?” in conjunction with Graham Harman's speculative metaphysics of objects, Bogost acknowledges that we have no direct access to the experience of the bat, that the experience of such alien beings “withdraws” or “recedes” from us and from everything else.⁴⁶ Bogost, however, argues against Nagel's dismissal of “loose intermodal analogies” as means to approaching bat-ness, insisting that the analogies Nagel claims in his essay to be “of little use” are not “philosophically troublesome,” but simply terrible metaphors (AP, 64). Bogost responds that “*the only way to perform alien phenomenology is by analogy*”: “we never really understand the alien experience, we only ever reach for it metaphorically” (AP, 64 [emphasis in original], and 66).

Further, drawing on Harman's concept of “caricature” as a descriptor for the way that “objects try to make sense of each other through ... a rendering that captures

some aspects of something else at the cost of other aspects,” Bogost claims that “the mechanism that facilitates this sort of alien phenomenology” is marked by the way it “distorts” the “foreign perception”: Bogost calls this mechanism “metaphor” (*AP*, 66). “Metaphor,” as any good student of translation studies will recognize, is the Greek “original” (μεταφέρω) of the Latin words for both *metaphora* and *translatio*, with the Latin prefix (*meta-/trans-*, “over/across”) and root (*phora/latio*, “to carry”) simply translating the Greek. I say “simply,” but of course every translation *distorts*, or “contaminates,” producing something new — in this case, a divisive wall of “meaning differential” in Latin between *metaphora* and *translatio*. In the metaphysical discussion in which Bogost engages, however, the difference between “metaphor” and “translation” is minimal: when considering how best to represent the distortion taking place as a human attempts to grasp in language the object perception of a bat, Bogost (or Harman) might choose “metaphor,” whereas I (or Latour) might choose “translation.”

In fact, if we replace Bogost's “metaphor” with “translation,” we are able to see how intimately Bogost's “alien phenomenology” aligns itself with the Terentian *homo sum*, as I have outlined it in this essay: “relation takes place not just *like* translation but *as* translation ...: what if we deployed *translation itself* as a way to grasp alien objects' perceptions of one another” (*AP*, 67 emphasis in original)?⁴⁷ This type of grasping would entail an acknowledgment that we are attempting to find expression in human language(s) for language(s) beyond the human that we really don't know, that are withdrawn, like the language of the unconscious or the languages of the far-distant past — an acknowledgment that, in the words of Walter Benjamin's epigraph to this essay, “there is no event or thing in either animate or inanimate nature that does not in some way partake of language.”

Following Benjamin, it is high time we make some attempt to discover the means by which events and things, animate and inanimate nature, “partake of language.” Bogost rightly remarks that in order to make the attempt, “as humans, we are destined to offer anthropomorphic metaphors” for the experience of nonhumans in relations apart from humans (*AP*, 65). We must use “anthropomorphic metaphors” — in other words, we have to translate them into Human, just as the bat must translate them into Bat and a pebble must translate them into Stone. Bogost calls this a “torment” and a “suffering” that we share with all being(s): “Anthropocentrism is thus both a torment and a foregone conclusion for us

humans, but we need not feel alone in suffering under it" (AP, 80). It is *this* brand of humanism, one that acknowledges anthropocentrism as the *self-torment* of all human beings who yearn to translate the "nothing human" through languages that strain against the very limits of the human — this is the distorted, noisy, *contaminated humanism* I hear in the famous line from Terence's *The Self-Tormentor*.⁴⁸

Terence's "homo sum: humani nil a me alienum puto" has an uncanny allure in the sense that all good translations do, with a wow of connection, a flutter of differentiation, and a solid wall of distortion in the mix. There's something proverbial about it — "I am a human being; alien to me I deem nothing human." I conclude with Walter Benjamin — not from the expected "Task of the Translator," but from "The Storyteller." One can think of a proverb, Benjamin dreams, as "an ideogram of a story." He goes on: "A proverb, one might say, is a ruin which stands on the site of an old story and in which a moral twines about a happening like ivy around a wall."⁴⁸ There is something captivating, too, in Benjamin's image, steeped as it is in the aesthetics of ruination. Something alluring about a moral likened to twining ivy, recalling the twisting strands of genetic code, reminding us that this is an old story, both human and not — one encrusted with lichen and walled off from view, like Bilgames in Gilgamesh, Menander in Terence. We would need to find many a translator — both human and alien — to narrate this "human nothing."

"Nil" narras? "Nothing," you say?

1 Walter Benjamin, "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man," in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, ed. Peter Demetz (New York: Schocken, 2007), 314.

2 For readers unfamiliar with the play: *The Self-Tormentor* opens with Chremes presenting a long admonition to his neighbor Menedemus. Menedemus's self-tormenting behavior — his working himself to death — arises, Chremes reasons, as a result of his unwillingness to delegate tasks to his slaves. When Menedemus asks Chremes why he is so concerned with other people's affairs, Chremes responds with the famous *homo sum* line. Contextually, the line sounds more like the self-parody of a stock character (the nosy neighbor) than an incitement to higher, humanistic aspirations. For an in-depth discussion of the context for this line, see

Joseph McAlhany, "Crumbs, Thieves, and Relics: Translation and Alien Humanism," in this issue.

3 The quotation is from H. D. Jocelyn's rich account — and critique — of the history of Terence's *homo sum* as a "motto" strictly divorced from its contextual irony. See H. D. Jocelyn, "Homo sum: humani nil a me alienum puto," *Antichthon* 7 (1973): 15.

4 Peter Sloterdijk, *Neither Sun nor Death*, with Hans-Jürgen Heinrichs, trans. Steve Corcoran (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2011), 114.

5 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2010), xiv.

6 John Stirling, *P. Terentii Comoediæ Sex, or the Six Comedies of Publius Terence*, 3rd ed. (London: Rivington and Hawes, 1771), 130.

7 I allude to Descartes's "clear and distinct ideas" (*clara et distincta perceptio*) from his *Discourse on Method* (1637) for their indirect influence on writing techniques of the English Enlightenment, thinly filtered through Locke's *An Essay on Human Understanding* (1690). That is, the Cartesian principle that only "clear and distinct" ideas can be true, when applied to expression, produced the conviction that "obscurity" and "confusion" would be defeated when language itself was "clear and distinct." See "Part IV: Proofs of the Existence of God and of the Human Soul," in René Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, trans. Laurence J. Lafleur (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1956), 20–26; and "Chapter XXIX: Of Clear and Obscure, Distinct and Confused Ideas," in John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 226–232.

8 The first translation is by Kwame Anthony Appiah in *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), 111 (emphasis added). The second is by George Colman in *The Comedies of Terence, Translated into Familiar Blank Verse* (1765), cited in *The Oxford History of Classical Reception in English Literature: Volume 3, 1660–1790*, ed. David Hopkins and Charles Martindale (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 126.

9 I play off the title of Bruno Latour's *Reassembling the Social* in order to highlight the fact that a careful retracement of possible syntactic pathways allows for nonhuman agency. One "litmus test" for membership in the club of actor-network theorists, according to Latour, is "the precise role granted to non-humans. They have to be actors and not simply the hapless bearers of symbolic projection." Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 10. I am cognizant of the potential irony in invoking Latour in what might be construed as a deconstructive passage.

10 Interestingly, Andrew Cain notes that the two typical Latin translations of the Greek μηδέν ἄγαν (*ne quid nimis* and *nil nimis*) are "first attested in Latin literature in Terence [in *The Girl from Andros* and *The Self-Tormentor*, respectively] and found often in later Latin literature." Andrew Cain, ed. and trans., *Jerome's Epitaph on Paula: A Commentary on the Epitaphium Sanctae Paulae* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 394.

11 The Latin originals and English translations of the dialogue between Chremes and Syrus (lines 518–521) are from John Barsby's edition: Terence, *The Woman of Andros, The Self-Tormentor, The Eunuch*, ed. and trans. John Barsby (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2001), 229–231. Barsby provides the explanation of the Greek proverb on 231n38. All subsequent citations from the play refer to this edition.

12 Terence, *The Self-Tormentor*, 181–182, lines 16–19.

13 For snapshots of this history, see Obafemi Kujore, "A Note on *Contaminatio* in Terence," *Classical Philology* 69, no. 1 (1974): 39–42; and the chapter "*Contaminatio*" in Sander M. Goldberg, *Understanding Terence* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1986), 91–122.

14 Gilbert Norwood, *The Art of Terence* (1923; New York: Russell & Russell, 1965), 2 and 4.

15 Norwood, *The Art of Terence*, 1. A more recent representative of this camp is Eckard Lefèvre, who argues that Terence made drastic alterations to Menander's plot; see Eckard Lefèvre, *Terenz' und Menanders Heautontimorumenos* (Munich: C.

H. Beck, 1994). I leverage Norwood exclusively for his symptomatically flippant discourse about translation. His disparaging commentary on translation praxis — “mere translations,” “were he only a translator,” “nothing but a borrower” — serves Norwood primarily to accentuate Terence’s “essential originality” (*The Art of Terence*, 4, 6, 7, and 42). In this way, he buys into a false dichotomy between the craft of translation and the art of genius, incorrectly considered to stem from early German Romanticism. I have elsewhere argued for “the essential role played by the translator in Romantic thought,” noting that writers such as Goethe, Novalis, and the Schlegel explicitly associated translation praxis with the notion of “genius.” See C. C. Wharram, “Translation as Symptom: The ‘Sickness’ of the Romantic,” in *Prevajanje besedil iz obdobja romantike/Translation of Texts from the Romantic Period*, ed. Martina Ožbot (Ljubljana: Društvo slovenskih književnih prevajalcev, 2004), 161.

16 Norwood, *The Art of Terence*, 8.

17 J. C. B. Lowe, “The Intrigue of Terence’s *Heauton Timorumenos*,” *Rheinisches Museum für Philologie* 141, no. 2 (1998): 170.

18 A. J. Brothers, “The Construction of Terence’s *Heautontimorumenos*,” *Classical Quarterly* 30, no. 1 (1980): 95.

19 Terence, *The Self-Tormentor*, 180–181, lines 4–6.

20 Typically, critics have considered the “double play” to refer to Terence’s adaptation of Menander through his insertion of a second set of lovers (Chremes’s son Clitipho and his *meretrix* Bacchis) as counterweight to the primary set (Menedemus’s son Clinia and his maid Antiphila). As Brothers notes (I would add, quite rightly), “the insurmountable problem facing those who would seek to prove this is the impossibility of removing these two characters from the plot of the Latin play without destroying it completely” (“The Construction of Terence’s *Heautontimorumenos*,” 108).

21 The term *duplex* — and its cognate *duplicity* — that Terence applies to his text brings to mind Roland Barthes’s elucidation of “duplex structures” in his *Elements of Semiology*, with translation figuring prominently in his analysis; Roland

Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (New York: Hill and Wang, 1973), 22 and 86–87. From another perspective, Suzanne Jill Levine suggests that elevating the “subversive” aspects of translation forces us to confront a new object “lying dormant” within the original by recognizing in translation a sub-version, “a ‘version beneath,’ a potential version that the original imparts through the magical act of translation”; Suzanne Jill Levine, *The Subversive Scribe: Translating Latin American Fiction* (Champaign, Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press, 2009), iii.

22 See Antoine Berman, *The Experience of the Foreign: Culture and Translation in Romantic Germany*, trans. Stefan Heyvaert (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992); Levine, *The Subversive Scribe*; Douglas Robinson, *The Translator's Turn* (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991); Rainer Schulte's collections *The Craft of Translation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989) and *Theories of Translation: An Anthology of Essays from Dryden to Derrida* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); and Lawrence Venuti's *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation* (New York: Routledge, 1995) and *Scandals of Translation: Towards an Ethics of Difference* (New York: Routledge, 1998). For a longer discussion of their contributions to translation studies, see C. C. Wharram, “Preface: Objects of Translation(s),” in *Translation Theory/Pedagogical Practice: Teaching Romantic Translation(s)*, ed. C. C. Wharram, available on the website *Romantic Circles Pedagogies Commons* (2014), paragraphs 18–24, http://www.rc.umd.edu/pedagogies/commons/translation/commons.2014.translation.wharram_intro.html.

23 This translation of Cézanne originates from Émile Bernard's transcriptions in *Souvenir sur Paul Cézanne, une Conversation avec Cézanne; la Méthode de Cézanne* (Paris: R. G. Michel, 1926), 26. Various translations of the quotation appear in numerous sources, such as Erle Loran, *Cézanne's Composition: Analysis of His Form with Diagrams and Photographs of His Motifs* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 95 and 133; and Albert Boime, *Revelation of Modernism: Responses to Cultural Crises in Fin-de-Siècle Painting* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2008), 108. The quotation included here is something of a pastiche of the passage's diverse translations.

24 Terence, *The Self-Tormentor*, 170.

25 Ibid., 194n23.

26 David Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2003), 67.

27 Ibid., 67–68.

28 Ibid., 68.

29 The quotations in the text are taken from the following passage: “To some people the idea of being buried alive by mistake is the most uncanny thing of all. And yet psycho-analysis has taught us that this terrifying phantasy is only a transformation of another phantasy which had originally nothing terrifying about it at all, but was qualified by a certain lasciviousness — the phantasy, I mean, of intra-uterine existence.” Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 24 vols., ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1953–1974), vol. 17, 244. All subsequent citations of Freud's work refer to this edition and will be included in abbreviated form in the text: for example, (SE 17, 244) refers to *Standard Edition*, volume 17, page 244. Please note that I have slightly altered some translations.

30 “The Uncanny” oscillates between examples at the level of the individual (“infantile”) and of the species (“primitive”) that demonstrate the return of previously “surmounted” psychic phenomena (beliefs, ideas, and affects). At the treatise's conclusion, Freud assigns “two classes” to the uncanny — “an uncanny experience occurs either when infantile complexes which have been repressed are once more revived by some impression, or when primitive beliefs which have been surmounted seem once more to be confirmed” — only to hint that this division may in fact collapse: “we shall not be greatly astonished to find that the distinction is often a hazy one” (SE 17, 248 and 249). “The Uncanny” develops a relationship between organism and species in much the same way as Terence's *shomo sum*.

31 Timothy Morton, “Ecology as Text, Text as Ecology,” *Oxford Literary Review* 32, no. 1 (2010): 6.

32 Ibid., 7.

33 While Bennett argues that it remains “an indispensable tool” in certain political contexts (for instance, in holding officials accountable, or resisting impositions of coercive domination), demystification tends to “work against the possibility of positive formulations” and “to screen from view the vitality of matter and to reduce *political* agency to *human* agency” (Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, xiv and xv). In this vein, Bennett echoes Latour's well-known essay, “Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern,” *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 2 (2004): 225–248.

34 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, vii.

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid., xvi.

37 Ibid., 99.

38 Ibid., 119–120 and 99.

39 Marc Bekoff and Jessica Pierce, *Wild Justice: The Moral Lives of Animals* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 40 and 42.

40 Ian Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology; or, What It's Like to Be a Thing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 5 and 64. This work will be cited as *AP* in the text for all subsequent references.

41 Graham Harman, *Quentin Meillassoux: Philosophy in the Making* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 6. See also Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (New York: Continuum, 2009), 5–6; and Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology*, 4.

42 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

43 Graham Harman, "Art and Paradox" (paper presented at "The Matter of Contradiction: Ungrounding the Object" conference at Le Centre international d'Art et du Paysage de l'île de Vassivière, Limousin, France, September 9, 2012).

44 Levi Bryant, "The Ontic Principle: Outline of an Object-Oriented Ontology," in *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*, ed. Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek, and Graham Harman (Melbourne: re. Press, 2011), 261–279 and 275–276. Actor-network theory is indeed grounded in translation. In one of the founding documents of actor-network theory, Michel Callon describes the role of translation within the retracing of networks of association, a process central to ANT: "Translation involves creating convergences and homologies by relating things that were previously different." Michel Callon, "Struggles to Define What Is Problematic and What Is Not: The Socio-logic of Translation," in *The Social Process of Scientific Investigation*, vol. 4 of *Sociology of the Sciences*, ed. Karin D. Knorr, Roger Krohn, and Richard Whitley (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1980), 211. In *Reassembling the Social*, as Latour begins to explain the importance of the concept of translation, he notes that "we have now reached the very birthplace of what has been called 'actor-network theory,' or more accurately, 'sociology of translation' — unfortunately the name never held in English" (106).

45 Bryant, "The Ontic Principle," 276.

46 Thomas Nagel, "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?" *Philosophical Review* 83, no. 4 (1974): 435–450.

47 In this quotation, I have substituted "translation" where Bogost used "metaphor."

48 I would like to acknowledge Joseph McAlhany's coinage of the term "alien humanism" as best capturing the kind of "self-tormenting humanism" I am attempting to describe here. See Joseph McAlhany, "Crumbs, Thieves, and Relics: Translation and Alien Humanism," in this issue.

49 Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), 108.

