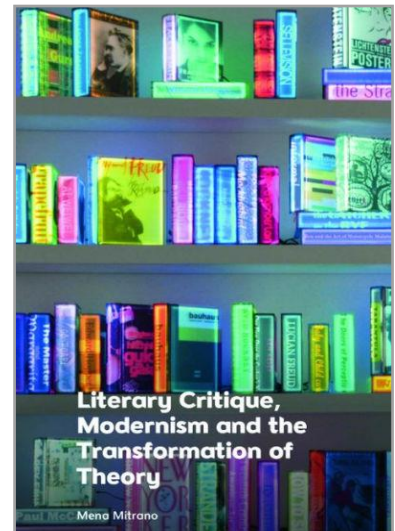


Mena Mitrano

Literary Critique, Modernism and the Transformation of Theory

Edinburgh, Edinburgh UP, 2022, pp. 296

Review by Martina Misia



Keywords: *literary critique, Italian theory, poststructuralism*

Picking up Mena Mitrano's latest book, *Literary Critique, Modernism and the Transformation of Theory*, the reader cannot help but be impressed and fascinated by its cover. A few dozen brightly colored books lie on the shelves of an anonymous wall bookcase. Of many of them, one can recognize the title (*The Master and Margarita*, *Sellelevision*, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*) or the author (Andrea Gursky, Friedrich Nietzsche, Paul McCarthy), an operation that, on the one hand, allows the attentive observer to grasp the heterogeneous character of the collection reproduced, and, on the other, suggests its common denominator, which can be identified in the capital importance that each of these texts has played in Western culture. Delving into the "Introduction," the reader discovers that the cover image depicts a portion of South Korean artist Airan Kang's installation *Textual Landscapes*, and that, unlike the paper volume he or she holds in his or her hands, the texts arranged horizontally and vertically on the shelves of Kang's bookcase cannot be opened.

The difference between modes of fruition transforms the book into a symbol of knowledge, raising a series of questions about the ways in which knowledge is produced and the strategies employed by human beings in order to protect and preserve it as a vulnerable object, to which they are nevertheless willing to assign a value. These questions do not only concern the general reader, but also and above all a particular type of reader: the literary critic who orients his or her reading activity towards the interpretation of texts, their semantic expansion, the articulation—and thus the creation—of their meaning. What does it mean, Mitrano invites us

to ask ourselves, to document? How do we produce what we know? And how do we know what we have documented?

The attempt and the invitation to answer these questions starts from two main premises, reiterated by the author throughout the development of her reflection: the first consists in the statement that reading is not a method, but a practice; the second concerns the fact that, before being a discipline, critique is an attitude towards an object of study, and such attitude must not be made to coincide with an attitude of “againstness” (33), of opposition towards the text. Freed from method and disciplinary boundaries, critique can be rethought starting from its constitutive predisposition to transformation and from its vocation to depend, in terms of theoretical foundation, on other disciplines, in particular linguistics, philosophy and psychoanalysis.

Primarily responsible for this openness of critique to the transcoding of ideas and concepts from other fields of knowledge has been aesthetic modernism, which has both demanded and encouraged new declinations of critique that would live up to its vocation for experimentalism. That is how philosophy, in the particular form of theory, has become part of what can be called the ‘toolbox’ of literary studies. This intimate link between modernism and critical theory has acted as a shaping force, leading to the development of the latter as a complement and moment of the former in its relationship with language and textuality. This is particularly true in the case of Italian Theory, a line of reflection characterized by an interest in the constitutively conflictual space of political practice, where, as Mitrano shows, the modernist motif of the conflict between life and form seems to be reactivated.

The ‘living thought’ elaborated by Roberto Esposito thus comes to constitute the vector running through Mitrano’s entire reflection, and it allows her to lay bare the ethical foundation on which the fundamental questions rest, questions to which, by means of this monograph and together with the academic community it is addressed to, she tries to answer: “What knowledge will we store? What will we value? [...] How do we recognize knowledge?” (40), but also: how will we use literature? How will we extend our activity to the world around us? In addressing the question of critique and the way in which it has found a place within literary studies, Mitrano thus addresses the problem of the ambiguous figure of the critic, his or her task within the community and the constitutive instability of his or her work, which on the one hand takes the form of thinking through literature (and thus through language), and on the other hand of trying to imagine forms of human agency that can contribute to the development of a just society.

Mitrano’s discourse is divided into seven chapters, each of which takes its cue from a keyword in literary studies. The first chapter clarifies what is to be understood by the term ‘critique,’

highlighting how, rather than a method or a field of investigation, it designates an attitude, an intellectual stance that the subject takes towards the reality that surrounds him or her. The main characteristic of this attitude is represented by indocility, investigated by Mitrano starting from the figures of three crucial thinkers such as Michel Foucault, Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin, who were capable of declining this stance in different and original ways. If for Foucault critique represents a cultural form, that is, a way for the subject to enter the relation with the society in which he or she lives by questioning the truth and the power that produced it, for Adorno critique constitutes a particular mode of philosophical reflection, capable of acting as a counterpoint to the cultural industry and its reification of the individual and ideology. The Adornian critical subject is an adversary of power, who, while sitting on the fringes of the noise produced by public discourse, emerges from the introspective dimension to turn outwards and diverge, to distance himself or herself and practice a form of dissidence towards it. From this point of view, the figure of the critic as it emerges from Adorno's reflections closely resembles the one elaborated by Benjamin, whose dissidence manifests itself as a need for anonymity, for a voluntary confinement that allows the intellectual-critic to carry out a work of destruction that is never an end in itself, but always culminates in a process of reconstruction.

A common trait of the three types of indocility identified by Mitrano is that they belong to a borderline zone of thought, stretched between the philosophical and the linguistic-literary dimensions: it is precisely in this space that the particular mode of critique designated by the term 'theory'—main topic of the second chapter—takes shape. Founded by Frederic Jameson among others, theory consists of an approach to the literary text characterized by continuous migrations, transcodings and translations of ideas across the boundaries of different disciplines. Jameson invents a new figure of the literary critic, whose activity does not consist in formulating opinions or thematic comments on the text, nor even in working on literary periodization: his or her way of reading is rather an operation of translation of the text, which is considered as an action or an expression one has to attribute meaning through continuous intellectual and cultural transfer between the disciplines neighboring literature, first and foremost philosophy. Jameson's theory is located in a space outside compulsive rationalization and constitutes an attempt to counteract the reification of the language of thought, to restore it to its vocation for mutability by deconstructing rigidly fixed terminologies.

The question of theory is also central in the third chapter, devoted to an attempt to define more precisely the stance of the critic and the type of knowledge he or she reaches in his or her relationship with texts. Starting with a comparison between the reflections of Wai Chee Dimock and Pier Aldo Rovatti, Mitrano emphasises how reading, understood as the practice of

recognition of the text, is not an operation that a subject performs on an object in order to derive some form of scientific knowledge: the dimension of exactitude and certainty is not relevant for the purposes of assessing the type of knowledge that the critic derives from his or her work. It is this ‘weakness’ that unites Dimock’s theory and Rovatti’s thought: in both cases, weakness stems from the proximity between the thinking subject and the object of thought, which far from being fixed in a specular correspondence find themselves losing their own boundaries, that become evanescent without however disappearing. Roberto Esposito’s reflections also moves in this direction: veering towards the impersonal dimension of life, he theorises what he calls the “third person” (2012) and thus reacts to the oppositional and conflictual conception of the relationship between subject and object, proposing to identify in the third person, that is a non-person, the place of true plurality. Esposito’s reflections bring Rovattian weak thought to its full fruition, further dissolving the boundaries of the subject without however renouncing this notion.

Building on Esposito’s analysis of community, in Chapter Four Mitrano moves on to discuss the question of language. In its peculiar impersonality, Esposito’s concept of third person allows us to conceive of the other in terms of a true plurality. We understand in these dense pages in what sense Italian Theory can be understood as a moment and a complement to modernism: to experience modernity means in fact to experience plurality, the problem of the many in the world that determine in the subject the need for a redefinition of language and thought, the creation of new names and new ways of writing. It is precisely the issue of human multiplicity that drives the subject to seek a beneficial resource in language, as Paolo Virno shows through his proposal of a return to Saussure (2014). In his re-reading of the Swiss linguist’s work, Virno focuses on the pre-individual and super-personal dimension of language and on the fact that it concerns each of its users to the extent that they are part of a collectivity formed by other users. In this sense, thinking about language always means thinking about the many, since language only exists among the members of a given community. By excluding individual as well as social claims to possession, the linguistic sign opens up a pre-individual dimension that is common to each of its users and that allows for the mediation of experience.

The discourse on modernism and the one on the mediating power of language converge in the fifth chapter, dedicated to the concept of tradition and to the figure of T. S. Eliot, whom Mitrano considers one of the first and major exponents of the living thought theorized by Esposito. In these pages Mitrano shows how Eliot’s literary theory springs from the conflict between life and form reactivated by Italian Theory and how the American writer has been able to elaborate a new concept of tradition. In Eliot’s thought, in fact, tradition does not coincide with a temporal

sequence of authors and works, but with a plane of repetition and misrecognition quite similar to the plane of coevalness postulated by Esposito. Eliot's critical activity thus manifests itself in a work of deconstruction of traditional literary history—conceived as a succession of authors—which culminates in the collapse of the idea of a literary linearity and in the constitution of a plane of writers' coevalness. Eliot's is thus an anti-archaeological conception of the concept of tradition, whose aim is not to reconstruct the past, but rather to bring to light its living potential, in a corrosive and decontextualizing process that shatters the monumentality of literary history to make it a coeval plane of repetitions, a continuous discourse always initiated by others. The works handed down to us by tradition always remain incomplete: their meaning always depends on the following work, which illuminates them retroactively, *après-coup*. In this sense, the figure of the writer as conceived by Eliot is that of an instrument of language, a means at the service of a writing—which Eliot calls “permanent” (1949)—he has no possession of.

The modernist conflict between life and form is openly redirected to the theorisation of an alternative line of thought by the feminist thinker Hélène Cixous, whose recovery of the work of the Brazilian writer Clarice Lispector is discussed in the sixth chapter. Mitrano shows in these pages how the operation performed by Cixous exemplifies, more clearly than in Eliot, that unfolding of modernism in living thought (and vice versa) postulated in Chapter Five. The very concept of modernism is now reinvented and conceived of as a set of motifs that periodically appear and disappear from literary discourse: far from indicating a period of literature circumscribed in time and space, modernism becomes synonymous with an aesthetic capable of crossing periodization and literary culture. In Cixous' reading, the artist does not simply represent an individual who produces a work of art, but rather a type of relationship with language whose outcome is a 'living writing' entirely comparable to the latent line of thought proposed by Esposito. The texts, dynamic objects subject to transformation, are pure potentiality and only live on a plane of repetition and recognition—which is precisely a plane of coevalness, in which each author is linked to the other by a circuit of gift and debt. In the intense deciphering theorized by Cixous, understanding a text therefore means awakening its meaning.

The seventh and final chapter is dedicated to poststructuralism, a term that, as Mitrano points out, embraces critical and philosophical tendencies related by a common distrust in the subject's ability to make itself the object of its own analysis. Rejecting the existence of a knowable reality independent of language which the linguistic sign would be able to exactly identify and describe, poststructuralism problematizes the relationship between signifier and signified that gave rise to the Saussurian sign, to the point of replacing the latter with the concept of trace (Jacques Derrida). If it is true that we can only signify through signs, it is equally true that they are not

what they represent, but a substitution of it, that is, a deferment of it. By identifying in the sign the absence of presence, poststructuralism intercepts the problematic unfolding of the search for meaning proper to critique: since it is not possible to grasp the act of existence except in the signs with which the world is disseminated, and since signs operate a deferral of presence, their meaning is destined to remain uncertain and doubtful. Through the reflections of Jean-Luc Marion and Jacques Lacan, Mitrano shows how the sign is indeed an enigmatic gift that the subject offers to an interlocutor who is constitutively incapable of correctly interpreting it, a gift therefore that always implies an act of faith.

With this book Mitrano provides literature scholars with a research perspective that identifies the practice of reading not only as a way of knowing and thinking about the world around us, but also and above all as a way of elaborating concrete possibilities for action. By interweaving ethical commitment and theoretical scrupulousness, Mitrano thus provides the academic community she addresses with the tools to elaborate a critical method that starts from the ethical foundation of critique itself and invites us to rediscover an affirmative resource in language and its potential.

Martina Misia completed her PhD in Transcultural Studies in the Humanities at the University of Bergamo (2023), where she has worked on a literary theory project on the topic of hybridity in contemporary fiction. Her main research interests concern conflictual aesthetics, identity theories and literary genres theories.

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