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Zahi Zalloua, *Theory's Autoimmunity: Skepticism, Literature, and Philosophy*. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2018. x + 225 pp. \$99.95 (hb). ISBN 978-0-8101-3779-0; \$34.95 (pb). ISBN 978-0-8101-3778-3.

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This is a challenging but fascinating book. At its heart is the question of “theory’s purchase on the world” (p. ix), the question, that is, of how Continental philosophy after Derrida relates to the world we live in, and particularly to philosophy and literature. The book begins on a defensive note, referring to the widespread suspicion of theory today, which often takes the form of calls for “more affirmative and descriptive modes of interpreting the world” (p. 3). It goes on to mount a spirited and compelling argument for the continuing relevance and necessity of theory, tackling the critique of theory on the part of philosophers such as Martha Nussbaum, Quentin Meillassoux and Bruno Latour, and on the part of literary scholars such as Sharon Marcus and Rita Felski. [1] This argument centers upon theory’s autoimmune character, that is, its constitutive and ethically urgent openness to otherness, which renders it both vulnerable to critique and immune to any permanent dismantling by other discourses.

The substantial introduction, entitled “Towards a Hermeneutics of Skepticism,” outlines the historical connections between theory, as we know it today, and the philosophical tradition(s) of skepticism, which Zahi Zalloua traces from the fourth century B.C.E. through to Montaigne, Derrida, Lacan, and Žižek. The introduction highlights the status of theory as philosophy’s legitimate but sometimes disavowed “child,” treating as illustrative the fact that Emmanuel Levinas’ reference to theory as philosophy’s legitimate child has been mistranslated into English to suggest its illegitimacy (p. 10). The idea of autoimmunity is then introduced. For Derrida, the autoimmune entity effectively turns upon itself by trying to shut out external forces. Yet, autoimmunity also becomes, in Derrida’s hands, a metaphor for the constitutive openness of the self. It is, according to Zalloua, “the primordial condition of possibility for modes of relating to the self and otherness” (p. 13). For Zalloua, modern skepticism, the kind associated with theory, breaks from Pyrrhonist skepticism to the extent that the latter remains wedded to an ideal of self-protection. Theory, by contrast, is autoimmune, in the sense that it refuses to disavow its own openness, and is thereby disruptive, impure, risky, and unpredictable. Zalloua goes on to ask about the relationship between theory and ethics, which is also concerned with the problem of the self-other relation. For theory, interpretation of the other is always inevitable, he argues, so the ethical question is how to do it well (or skeptically)—a question analogous to what Zalloua calls “Derrida’s ethico-hermeneutics of eating well” (p. 24)—in a manner that does not entail certainty, or any final judgement, mastery, or complete digestion of the other. The “hermeneutics of scepticism” is associated by Zalloua with “an ethics of hesitation” which “should not be

confused with quietism, an unwillingness to critique or speak” (p. 23). It is precisely in its “interpretative reticence” that theory’s autoimmunity resides (p. 28). Zalloua argues that without this quality, theory becomes mechanical and programmatic, losing “its critical interpretive force, its ability to receive and respond to the other or the event, to address and produce new meanings” (p. 28).

The ensuing five chapters present a number of case studies of theory’s engagement with, or rather expression through the medium of, different discourses, including philosophical, literary, and psychoanalytic. These case studies are intended to highlight the creative, interpretive work performed by theory. In these chapters, autoimmunity and skepticism are associated with essaying, the death drive, irony, the Lacanian logic of the non-all, and hysteria. This proliferation of analogous ideas and metaphors is itself illustrative of the unruliness of theory’s ways.

The first chapter is devoted to Montaigne, whose *Essays* Zalloua interprets as contesting philosophy’s attempted exclusion of otherness and uncertainty and as gesturing towards “the birth of a new subject, a monstrous subject,” receptive “to a cognitive and affective experience of the self as discontinuous, divided, and haunted by an irreducible, constitutive otherness” (p. 28). Zalloua portrays Montaigne as an “accidental theorist” (p. 34), a skeptic who questioned the self-innoculating, self-mastering model of philosophy that had dominated since Seneca and Socrates. What the essayist discovered, in the course of his reflections, was the incoherence, vulnerability, and fundamental strangeness of the self, what Zalloua calls “a self ‘beyond mastery,’ a self that Montaigne did not foresee: his autoimmune self” (p. 52).

The second chapter, “Ideology, Critique, and the Event of Literature,” concentrates on recent critiques of literary suspicion, understood as the practice of reading against the grain in an attempt to expose the workings of ideology. It invokes two dominant “factions” within the current scene of literary criticism, the first of which (represented by thinkers such as Bruno Latour, Toril Moi, Rita Felski, and Sharon Marcus) advocates descriptive or “surface” reading strategies, and the second of which (represented here mainly by Slavoj Žižek) takes its inspiration largely from the Frankfurt school, psychoanalysis, and deconstruction. One of the arguments for “surface” reading is that critique is no longer necessary or helpful in a world where ideological lies are blatant. This chapter contests this notion, showing, for example, how Žižek’s reading of the 2005 Paris riots reveals the blind spot common to both liberal and conservative commentators, who failed to analyze the “objective violence” of the hegemonic system at the root of the riots, concentrating only on the “subjective violence” of the rioters (p. 68). Zalloua’s readings of a prose poem by Charles Baudelaire (“To Each His Chimera”) and of Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved* also point to the shortcomings of descriptive, un-suspicious interpretations, including those that adopt the language of suspicion and ideological critique. Zalloua suggests that both literary texts reveal the inadequacies of any readerly supposition of interpretive mastery. According to Zalloua, the concluding attitude of the prose poem’s narrator undermines the possibility of any “symptomatological” interpretation (p. 60) that would interpret the Chimera-bearing figures it describes as, for example, unconscious victims of bourgeois ideology. The text offers neither the narrator nor the implied reader-critic any ironic, detached position that would itself be immune to ideological fantasy, and yet somehow resists leaving the reader-critic with the sense of “Indifference” that finally afflicts the narrator, instead endlessly inviting her curiosity, her “affective investment in the intellectual labor of interpretation and critique” (p. 63). I would add, as a Baudelaire scholar, that this brief reading is entirely in line with existing readings of Baudelaire’s prose poems which focus on their unstable irony. For Zalloua,

Baudelaire's self-reflexive text "allegorizes the autoimmune process of reading critically" (p. 29). In his reading of Morrison's *Beloved*, similarly, Zalloua argues that by staging both a scene of trauma and the complexities of its interpretation (like many other literary texts, indeed, including others considered in this book), the novel renders final interpretation impossible while also endlessly soliciting interpretive decisions. Literature, for Zalloua, "enlivens" and "sharpens" theory (p. 79) by militating against definitive explanation, including the kind that can be produced by theoretical or ideological readings, and by thus reminding theory of its constitutive autoimmunity, its skepticism, defined by the author as "the will to essay," and as "a form of interpretive care," which he distinguishes from suspicion, or "the will to distrust" (pp. 65–66).

The third chapter, "Irony, Power, and the Death Drive," considers irony as the quintessential trope of theory, insofar as it has the potential to unsettle all univocal meanings and to backfire against those who deploy it. The chapter takes Stendhal's *Red and Black* as a case study for its warning against the "temptation towards exemplarity" that leads theorists "to isolate and fetishize their object of inquiry" (p. 96). Zalloua distances himself from the dominant critical reading of the novel's ending as exemplary of the triumph of the authentic self over the socially determined self. He gives particular attention to the variant of this interpretation that has been offered by Jacques Rancière, for whom Julien's decision to exclude himself from society exemplifies an assumption of democratic equality, showing that it is possible for even a commoner to enjoy the idleness formerly afforded only to aristocrats. According to Zalloua, Rancière's reading, like more traditional romantic readings of the novel's ending, evacuates the text of its ironic contradictions, and the protagonist of his self-delusions. Julien's irrational sabotage of his own calculated and strategic rise through society is instead symptomatic, for Zalloua, of the operation of the death drive, understood in the Lacanian rather than Freudian sense as a kind of excess that, thanks to its both "destructive *and* creative facets" (p. 96), motivates both Julien's social ascent (via *kratophilia*) and his fall (via *kratophobia*). For Zalloua, this pleasure-seeking drive is fundamental to literature and is what makes the latter a natural partner for theory. As a Stendhal specialist who has herself spent time reading Lacan, I would note that while it is true that the historically dominant reading of the novel tends to smooth over the hero's contradictions, many (often feminist) critics have also highlighted the ironies and contradictions of the novel's ending. I would also point out that the character in Stendhal's novel who arguably exemplifies most vividly the ironies and complexities of the death drive is effectively written out of Zalloua's analysis: Mathilde is dismissed by the latter as "a calculating subject," oddly just after he quotes her decision to risk everything on "a dangerous game" (p. 89). I would contend instead that Mathilde is the character in *Red and Black* who, in her active and always excessive embrace of otherness, is most exemplary of what Zalloua calls "theory's hysterical core" and its "inventive scepticism" (p. 96), and also of the challenge that literature poses to the orthodoxies of literary criticism. If Zalloua partially repeats critical orthodoxy even as he reads this most ironic of novels as exemplary of literature's defiance of exemplarity, this gesture in itself arguably exemplifies his argument that irony, "theory's trope par excellence," "haunts all narratives" (p. 81).

The fourth chapter, "Queering Difference, or the Feminine Logic of the 'Non-All,'" tackles sexual difference, taking in both Žižek's "dialogue" with French feminism and a reading of Marguerite Duras's *The Ravishing of Lol Stein*. Zalloua suggests that Žižek queers the question of sexual difference by steering it beyond the old culture/biology binary, often complicated by thinkers like Julia Kristeva and Hélène Cixous, and of course, Simone de Beauvoir, but now apparently transcended altogether. Zalloua follows Žižek (and Lacan) in conceiving of feminine logic as an openness to disruptive encounters with the Real, or as a form of traumatophilia. He pits Lacan's

symbolic formulation of sexuation against Luce Irigaray's insistence upon the significance of anatomical sex difference, which itself constitutes a strategic contestation of Lacan's arguably phallogocentric paradigm of feminine difference as "non-all" and as contrasting with "the masculine logic of the all" (p. 111). For Žižek, the problem with any notion of a feminine specificity that would be inassimilable to the Symbolic is that this idea can always be turned into a male cliché. Zalloua quite rightly challenges this overly simplifying reading of French feminist thought, which significantly underestimates its sophistication. Zalloua goes on to read the love that sustains the relationship between the eponymous heroine and the male narrator of Duras's novel as partially exemplary of the feminine or queer logic of the non-all. He thereby argues that this logic, this love of the Other in all of its resistance and invitation to interpretation, is not the preserve of females or female characters alone, and moreover that it guides the work of skeptical interpretation.

Chapter 5, "Immunizing Ontology: The Speculative Turn," shifts to the challenge to theory, and indeed philosophy since Kant, that is currently being led by proponents of speculative realism and the related field of object-oriented ontology (OOO). The materialist return to ontology (with its emphasis on being), away from epistemology (with its emphasis on knowledge) and post-Kantian "correlationism" (the idea that being is always necessarily mediated by our knowledge of it), is plausibly presented by Zalloua as an attempt "to quarantine philosophy from theory's contagion, from its unhealthy penchant for skepticism and reading," and to bypass "the attendant problem of the ethical relation to the human and non-human alike" (pp. 123–24). Zalloua contends that Derrida's version of correlationism, as epitomized by statements such as "There is nothing outside the text," is in fact profoundly concerned with the problem of reference as by the ethics of the relation to the Other, as his deployment of the notion of autoimmunity suggests. What Meillassoux calls Derrida's "sickened correlationism" (p. 130), the idea that human understanding of the world is not just mediated but that this mediation is always incomplete (or "non-all"), is precisely what saves Derrida's subject from being closed upon itself: this subject is open to alterity. Ultimately, while both speculative realism and theory insist upon the incompleteness of the human subject, according to the former it is possible to conceive of a world unmediated by language and subjectivity whereas, for the latter, unmediated access to the Real is an impossibility.

A short conclusion, "Desire of the Theorist," draws together the main threads of the argument, asserting that an attitude of skepticism is both self-protective and undermining of the integrity of the self, just as it is both interested in interpreting the other while refusing to make of her, him, or it an object of knowledge. Ultimately, theory's skepticism, autoimmunity, and traumatophilia distinguish it from philosophy, which it "queers" insofar as it works both with and against it. The book finishes by insisting upon the ethical responsibility of theory always to seek out new encounters while also remaining attentive to the new understandings that emerge from its interpretive work. Overall, this book reminds scholars in the Humanities of the importance of reading curiously, skeptically, and, perhaps above all, humbly.

NOTES

[1] Representative works of that critique of theory include Martha Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1997); Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*. Trans. Ray Brassier (New York: Continuum, 2008); Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of

Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," *Critical Inquiry* 30 (2004): 225--48; Sharon Marcus and Stephen Best, "Surface Reading: An Introduction," *Representations* 108 (2009): 1--21; and Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

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