

JACQUES LEZRA AND OLIVER FELTHAM

INTERVIEW

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Oliver Feltham: How did you first come across Barbara Cassin's work?
Jacques Lezra: As far as I know it was when Emily Apter approached me about doing the work on the edition of the translation of the *Vocabulaire européenne des philosophies*. At that point I knew of Cassin I think by reputation but primarily as a friend of Emily's and as a philosopher of antiquity. There was this terrific collection of texts about animals in antiquity I knew of, but I hadn't read *L'effet sophistique* which became *Sophistical Practice* in English.¹ I knew of, but hadn't really investigated, her *Parmenides* edition which I later became acquainted with.

Oliver Feltham: When you first came across her work, when Emily Apter presented her work to you, how did she fit within the categories that were at work for you in your field? How was her work named? What kind of thinker was she presented as?

Jacques Lezra: Well, at the time I was working much less in political philosophy and more at the intersection of literary criticism, and I suppose you would call it epistemology. I was increasingly interested in ways in which practices of translation, and problems of translation of literary texts but also philosophical texts, disclose something about the original that was not patent in the original itself. So I had a kind of inchoate feeling that translation presented a really interesting direction to go in with regard to that point of intersection between literary criticism and epistemology. But it didn't have a name for me, and it didn't have a particular content. I had done a great deal of translating already by then, but I didn't have an awareness of myself as a translator, as someone who thought about translation very much until I began working with Cassin's work and seeing what the philosophical stakes could be. I took her at the time to be following out some of the questions regarding translation that you find in Derrida's work, but putting them to the test of a kind of institutional practice, putting them into the frame of institutions, putting

1. Cassin, B., Romeyer-Dherby G., & Labarriere, J-L., *L'animal dans l'antiquité* (Paris : Vrin, 1997).

the problem of translation into the context of a European project and then trying to think about what that translation of translation into the European context, into the context of the European funded project, might reflexively tell you about what translation is and can do in this moment or in the moment of 2004-2014. So there wasn't a specific name for this yet, and it certainly wasn't 'translation studies', which was and remains largely a field devoted to practical problems in translation, and not substantially or substantively to this philosophical problem posed by translation. The work of Lawrence Venuti was just beginning to make a splash in the United States and, although I found it not very useful, it was in conversation with Venuti, that Cassin's work came in the United States at that moment. It's also worth remarking that the United States academic world is deeply monoglot – in literature, where everything tends to be taught in English translation, and especially and very shockingly in philosophy, where the preponderance of analytic philosophy over continental, of philosophy devoted to solving a currently-defined problem rather than thinking about philosophical problems as intrinsically historical, thus multi-lingual, has meant that departments of philosophy largely set aside the matter of translation as secondary or even trivial.

Oliver Feltham: I think we're going to come back to this relationship between a certain kind of thinking of translation beyond the immediately practical difficulties of particular translations, and this larger question of institutional frameworks, of what might be a European project. This is a really interesting connection that you make in the introduction to your work *Untranslating Machines*. But specifically, there was something you just said then that caught my attention, which is this idea that in a translation, or in a contest between different translations of the same original text, something of the original text might be revealed. Can you go into that a little bit more?

Jacques Lezra: It's been my experience that very often what we fondly call the original text cannot make explicit – because of its originality, because it's written in, say, English – there are things about it that can't be made explicit simply because of their being expressed in English at a certain moment that can emerge when a translation occurs. So even terribly mistaken and erroneous translations quite often, to my mind, get something more right about the original than the original gets itself, because the original is constrained to a lexicon of enunciation, a moment of enunciation, and a set of protocols that by the same token are the conditions of intelligibility of the original but also constrain the original from opening up more interesting articulations and more problematical engagements with different possible worlds. Those engagements and articulations can emerge asynchronously through translations that get things wrong, that reveal something more interesting about the original than the original was able to reveal about itself. I wish I had an immediate example to offer. I tend to find them. It's not that I have a methodology to my work, but if I did, I would say that that's it; that is, to find, as I'm reading an original, to find something that strikes me as particularly peculiar in a formulation and... Oh I think I do actually have an example and perhaps we can get it from

the *Vocabulaire* itself. So this is from Alain Badiou's little entry on 'Français' in the *Vocabulaire*. He's distinguishing French from English, and he says, he characterizes English as...He makes a comment early in the entry about what he later calls "*la sensibilité empirique de la langue anglaise*" [the empirical sensibility of the English language] which can in turn become ineluctably a platitude if the translator is not a creator.² At the end of the entry Badiou writes, in the English translation:

We know of course (and this is a primary theme of this dictionary) that nothing peremptory can be said about languages that will not be disproven by some writer or poem or other. It is thus that rightly or wrongly we sometimes envy the power of German to lay out in an idolatrous semantics the depths offered by infinite exegesis. We also sometimes wish for the descriptive and ironic resources of English – this marvelous texture of the surface, the argumentation always circumscribed – which does not totalize anything since the grammar is never that of the here and now. And even the branching of Italian – when we stop thinking that it muddles everything at will and is running thirty different conversations at once, all erudite and mimetic, we admire its velocity and that when it affirms something, it keeps a clear eye on the other possible affirmation that a simple repentance over the sentence may bring to mind.

But this is not what Badiou says about English. Where the translation reads "We also sometimes wish for the descriptive and ironic resources of English – this marvelous texture of the surface, the argumentation always circumscribed – which does not totalize anything since the grammar is never that of the here and now" Badiou writes: "*Il nous arrive aussi de désirer la ressource descriptive et ironique de l'anglais, ce touché merveilleux de la surface, cette argumentation toujours circonscrite, qui ne totalise rien, parce que la grammaire n'est jamais que celle de l'ici et du maintenant.*" The translator makes a serious, if understandable, mistake – achieving a superb *contresens*. English doesn't totalize, Badiou means, just because its grammar is never *anything but* that of the here and now. The mistranslation precisely suppresses the grammatical operator "*que*," which the translator drops, having forgotten that the antecedent *ne* requires the subsequent *que*, and hence the negation of the affirmation. In other words, the *time* of translation is time in which to forget the sovereign force of the antecedent *ne*... this, just as the French is reminding its readers that English, the target language, is never *anything but* that of the here and now. The translator's mistake adds the factor of time, or reveals it, just where French's grammar hangs together, as if simultaneously, the antecedent *ne* and subsequent *que*. Here it's the *French* that works to circumscribe, and it's the (mistaken) English that adds the factor of time, ironically just as it asserts, wrongly to Badiou's French but correctly in mistranslation, that "the [English] grammar is never that of the here and now," since in this case it performs an act of forgetting what was not here-and-now in English, that is, the *ne-que* of the antecedent French. And this, I take it, discloses something about grammar *in French*, and perhaps

2. Cassin, B. et al., *Vocabulaire européenne des philosophies : dictionnaire des intraduisibles* (Paris : Editions du Seuil, 2004/2019), 468.

grammar *in general*, that Badiou's French cannot quite say *in French*, that is, that the time of expression in natural languages is *never* here-and-now, that is, never *formalizable*. Here what's at stake is not only an error in which a kind of nationalist bias or even a kind of ontologically nationalist bias makes itself felt – as when Badiou affirms that English is more “empirical” than French,” or Italian more fanciful – but the possibility of translating between natural and formal languages in general. And the limits of that possible translation are available, to Badiou's French, only when it's mistranslated into English.

Oliver Feltham: It struck me when reading the first couple of parts of *Marx's Things* and then also *Untranslating Machines*, that part of the way that you work is that you use contesting translations. There's the example you come back to quite frequently, which is Marx's claim that 'production is *mittelbar* consumption' and then it's translated as 'simultaneously' or it could have been translated by 'immediately'. What this allows you to do, this unfortunate translation or mistranslation, is to show how the translations open up a semantic field which couldn't possibly be completely rendered explicit in the original text without an incredibly long discourse I suppose. And then you basically skip from the level of the translated text down to the, well, it is almost a kind of basement of the semantic field. You then move laterally between these kind of basements, these wide semantic fields that have been opened up.

Jacques Lezra: Yes, yes, that's a very good description of it. And I think that this will actually make sense in the context of a later question as well, the question about materialism, perhaps. What you are describing is the semantic basements amongst which I move contiguously, if you want. Let's say that I wanted to draw a distinction between my work, the way I understand the philosophy of translation, and Cassin's work. One thing that I would say is that for her the figure of the untranslatable and the characterization of untranslatability works as a kind of suturing point or *point de capitonnage*, such that the untranslatable or the claim of untranslatability attaches a natural language to a set of possible translations at a certain point. For Cassin, that's a certain point of constant work and constant repetition of work. But the perspective that she offers is a perspective of the untranslatable as a kind of suturing point: complex, always contested, *en tant que*, in as much as, it brings together a set of possibilities in the underground sense, and a current day usage of the term that is to be characterized as untranslatable.

My view is that leaving things there – which I believe is more or less where she left them philosophically, in the wake of the *Vocabulaire européen des Philosophies*, with an enormous elaboration of both the philological and philosophical attention to what it would mean to be encountering such a point of suture – leaving things there neglects the question of under what conditions is the suturing occurring? Under what conditions is the claim of untranslatability being made and with what consequences? Those are questions that lead us toward a different political horizon than the one that Cassin is offering generally, and certainly different from the one that Apter, who's one of Cassin's most attentive readers, offers. My sense is

that at those points of suture we need to enquire into what is disclosed, that is, the capture of both the labour of translation and the moment of translation by institutions, larger institutions that have always already spoken out and described and placed the value on the *kind* of labour that is to be performed repetitively at the moment of translation, and on the kind of *time* that it takes to perform that labour. In other words, the distinction that I would draw is to say well, given – ‘given’?! – or if we grant that there are things like untranslatables, and if we grant the work that is done by the claim of untranslatability, we have to take the further step of thinking of the time and the work of untranslatability as already taking place in the horizon of capture by late-stage capital, by information capital, and so on. This is something that is present in the *practice* of Cassin’s work. She is currently very engaged in thinking about different forms of AI and machine translation, the exceptionally interesting ways in which the corpus of materials that DeepL, Linguée and other AIs handle is primarily juridical and primarily enframed by the English search platform, and things of the sort. Primarily, to my mind, she’s thinking about these, though, not as expressions of a global political economy, and not as having a bearing on the ecological disaster (in as much as AI and machine translation are great drains on resources), but in ways in which those procedures, the AI procedure, the machine translation procedure, could increase the scope of untranslatability and increase the way... let’s see how to put this...and clarify what we mean by the work of translation and the time of translation.

One of your questions asks me about the lack of a reference to Marx in her work and the sustained presence of the conversation with Arendt and that, to my mind, is significant. I think that the view that I was just offering – which is the view that capital, as a machine for capturing time and labour and expressing time and labour as value predicates, can be associated with translation and with untranslatability – that this view makes the figure of untranslatability much more useful for a critique of global capital than I think it is in Cassin’s work. I’ve taken a kind of roundabout way back at your question, but perhaps not answered it fully.

Oliver Feltham: But there is this commonality between your work and Cassin’s with her polemic about Google that came out very early and made quite a splash in France. She was very early on concerned about algorithmic learning and machine translation, well before DeepL came out. You have this term where you talk about ‘machine translating’ as a particular phenomenon that you’re concerned to circumscribe or you see as something that’s emerging in your book *Untranslating Machines*. Is there a similarity of concern there?

Jacques Lezra: Yes, there is, quite so. Let me put this in a way that is, I think, implicit in *Untranslating Machines* but not made as explicit as it ought to be. One of the early developments in machine translation was dependent upon a conception of semantic transportation or of almost word-to-word, plus syntactical function. That seems to me now to have been the expression of a kind of idea of translation directed by the notion of the boundability of what you might call semantic objects or semantic fields. They *could* be boundable. And so to that extent there could be a translation

that went semantic object to semantic object by virtue of an algorithm in which both syntax and replacement were carried out upon the semantic objects. That is no longer the operating paradigm in machine and information and AI translation. It's no longer a paradigm of the integrity or to use the term from Badiou's entry on "Français," of the sovereignty of the bounded semantic object, of the semantic object as boundable. It's been replaced by, I think, something that isn't yet what I have in mind, but which is much more interesting, which is simply large-scale database searches in which expressions can be correlated to other expressions and offered without the supposition that there is an atomic semantic object that can be moved from one linguistic space to another linguistic space. You might say that this is a transposition of the AI and machine translation field from a mathematical conceptualization, or a domain, or a procedure that conceived of translation in the horizon of the mathematizability or formalizability of semantic objects, from there onto what simply operates upon a corpus, and compares the corpus of existing possible phrases to another corpus of existing possible phrases, and make substitutions and draws analogies between them, without requiring the mathematizability of the semantic object.

But there's a third way of proceeding, which is the one that I prefer, which is one that acknowledges that semantic objects are non-boundable. It sets aside the formal or mathematical principle. It also doesn't limit itself to the kind of practical consideration of huge databases, but rather focuses on the more intriguing philosophical problem of the non-boundability and thus the non-countability of semantic objects. I moved a little too quickly there when I say 'non-boundable therefore non-countable'. I'm making too quick a transition because you can have fuzzily boundable semantic objects that are more or less countable. You just need a much looser definition of what counts-as-one (*laughs*) in the field of translation, in the field of natural language. That's a discussion that we need to have, and it's at that point that something like materialism enters our discussion, because the way in which semantic objects are non-bounded is itself bound up with their horizons of usage, moments of inscription in different institutions, uses, different ends, histories of mediation, and in the different languages, and so on, including languages other than the ones that are both the origin or the target language, the translation. So I suppose that the most, the strongest way to put this, is to say that once you start working from the premise of the unboundability of semantic objects, you're also talking about the unboundability of natural languages, and therefore you're not ever talking about only translating between English and French: those are not bounded fields either. The act of moving between English and French is an act that passes through German, Italian, Hindu, Spanish, and undoes the objects, "English" and "French," from within and from without. How that act and how that process passes through is I think a little bit like what you were describing concerning this underground subterranean area (*laughs*) there, and it's what in my work I've referred to as 'wild mediation' or 'wild materialism'.

Oliver Feltham: There's a whole series of inquiries that branch off from what you've been talking about but I don't want to lose from view one of Barbara Cassin's larger interventions. I'm curious to see whether it's had an impact on your work, on your thinking, which is her repositioning of the sophists and this baptizing of this new field that will be called 'logology' or 'sophistics'. She shows quite convincingly here and there that the sophists are continually categorized and dismissed and marginalized by the dominant philosophical discourse today, right up to the present moment, both in the work of major philosophers, say reacting to Derrida's work by dismissing it as sophistry, or in the work of some of the great commentators and specialists in the sophists. I just wonder if you see consequences or ways of making sense of her attempt to reposition the sophists? What are the contemporary consequences of that repositioning?

Jacques Lezra: I think it's one of the major gestures in contemporary philosophy, that repositioning of the sophists, because what the figure of the sophist condenses is a variety of what have become shibboleths in the philosophical institution: a particular relation to the disclosing of truth, a particular characterization of being in language, a particular characterization of the city, of the *polis*, and of the standing of the philosopher in relation to the city. All of those are intimately tied into the characterization of the sophists and the exclusion of the sophists as well. Cassin's effort to bring the sophists back, or to reconfigure the figure of the sophist, seems to me crucial, partly because it brings us back to a different conception of truth and of the achieving of truth. In her work on South Africa and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission she links the notion of 'sufficient truth' to the sophists: 'enough truth for X'; the usability or functionality of truth. Truth is a functioning device and is a device that has to be produced, judged, assessed according to uses and to the principle of sufficiency. It's truth enough for something, always. That seems to me to be an absolutely critical contribution to contemporary philosophy and also to contemporary political philosophy quite specifically, because it requires us to set aside the way in which claims to truth can be settled into a given institution, or a given position, or a given charismatic figure, and settled into it in a way that *remains* settled. So sophistic practice is a practice of unsettling the positioning of truth within an institution, a speaking voice, or a speaking position. It's quite an extraordinary destabilizing of the classic conception of institution and of the classic conception of charismatic leadership as being able to speak the truth and as being the subject that possesses the truth. If truth is only to be, if truth is primarily to be assessed as, sufficiency or sufficient truth *for* this or that, then we are in a different situation entirely, because the 'for this or that' is always going to change with material conditions and circumstances and requirements and needs. So truth is going to be highly conditioned to the needs of the moment and to moments of expression. It's a very radicalizing position, it seems to me, and one which will take us a lot of time to figure out how to include in discussions of political philosophy and of the possible futures of philosophy in the public sphere.

Oliver Feltham: Let's keep going on this question of truth. I'm thinking about truth claims made by genres of academic discourse. So within particular disciplines, with scholarship that follows the rules of the genres of scholarship, and is published in academic journals, we're making truth claims about our objects. I was just thinking, we've both been through particular theories in the anglophone academy apart from others, in which, in the worlds of high theory, genres were sometimes blurred, sometimes mixed. People experimented with genre. Then we come to France, in which academia in general is fairly conservative. There are publishing houses that will not publish certain texts. Cassin tells the story of her editor not wanting to publish her book on Austin as a complementary piece to *L'effet sophistique*. Cassin publishes books that are halfway between autobiography and philosophical reflection. Are there some interesting parallels there?

Jacques Lezra: Yes, I mean any genre is, well it entails and sets in place modalities for claiming truth and establishing truth. So, on the one hand, then, you would say, well, okay, so let 1000 genres bloom. Contesting genres and competing genres will all, will each entail a different, slightly different but mutually translatable figure of how to claim truth. So if I'm a physical scientist, my truth claims will be made in one genre, if I'm a psychoanalyst in perhaps another one, if I'm a historian, yet another one. So a kind of perspectivism is entailed that multiplies the number of possible ways in which truth can be claimed by indexing it to the different genres: speech genres, academic genres, ordinary language genres that we can all handle. What I think is extraordinary about Cassin's work is that it takes place on a second level with regard to that multiplicity or multiplication of generic claims to truth by saying, well, what is it that they have in common that allows these claims to be recognizable and transmissible and translatable from genre to genre to genre? The seeming step is toward a universal of some sort that would underlie the multiplication of generic truth claims and make them mutually intelligible because of a common participation in the universal way of claiming truths. That is specifically what Cassin's work will attack: that kind of crypto-Platonism that unifies the radical plurality and diversity of 'truth-claimings' by means of a hidden or structuring universal which makes them translatable amongst each other. That's where the sophisticated effect enters, it seems to me. It's a disaggregation of the unifying principle of the translatability of truth claims across genres. The consequences of that are, as I was saying before, I think, really as yet unthought. We don't yet know what the consequences of that are for philosophy. Minimally, I think we can register that it's an important and even decisive move by registering how much opposition it creates. It's really difficult to get philosophers to agree that a kind of radical pluralism, a plurality of worlds – it's almost a kind of Lewisian pluralism there – is in fact, entailed and can flow from this undoing of the hidden universality or the hidden claim to the universal. That's a universal that we find in most standard accounts of the pluralism of truth claims.

Oliver Feltham: This suspicion or possibility of a hidden claim to the universal is something that you clearly get in certain interpretations of Alain Badiou's work

because he does have a set theoretical model of what the unfolding of truth procedure is going to look like – it's a generic multiple. I think that one of the fascinating encounters in contemporary philosophy has been between Cassin and Badiou.

Jacques Lezra: I completely agree.

Oliver Feltham: In particular, I was wondering if, I mean, there's so much separating them and at the same time, so many bridges to be drawn. But one of the ways they obviously found a way of bridging their difference was talking about gender and philosophy: what it meant to be a man doing philosophy nowadays and what it meant to be a woman doing philosophy nowadays.

Jacques Lezra: Yes, and I think also both of them demonstrate a commitment to thinking of philosophy as a conversational practice that way. You see that, for example, in Badiou's rewriting of the *Republic*, which is not only a restaging of a conversation, but is an enacting of a conversation with a Platonic precursor, and the offer of a genre of philosophical composition that is based in conversation not in the trivial sense but in an agonistic sense, even in a radically antagonistic sense. I think that is shared by the two of them. In Cassin's case, the modality of philosophical conversation – and perhaps this is something that makes the conversation with Badiou so fruitful – is that the frame is, can be likened to a Socratic frame, in as much as there is a continuing conversation with figures that can be occupied at different moments by either philosopher that works primarily by means of irony and by contesting the positioning of the interlocutor in a way that also reflects a questioning of the position of the voice that is making it, or performing the questioning of the interlocutor's position. I think that they share that. It's what has enabled the conversation about gender in philosophy to be so prosperous and so powerful for both of them.

Oliver Feltham: Can I take you towards your diagnosis of the situation of the humanities in the contemporary university faced with the various types of management techniques that are daily tried out on recalcitrant or ungovernable academics? What, if any, help do you see coming from a figure like Barbara Cassin for the work of diagnosis, the critical response, the resistance to such practices?

Jacques Lezra: I think Cassin's work is wonderfully useful here because in the contemporary neoliberal university, and increasingly the sovereign, governing paradigm – and I mean 'governing' in the strong sense, it's the paradigm that *governs* and subordinates and calculates the value of the production of knowledge – the governing paradigm is based on a particular translatability paradigm which has a great deal in common with what I was earlier referring to as the notion that semantic objects are countable. My impression is that the kind of neoliberal regime towards which the governance of the university is inclining at the moment – as is absolutely well-known, Bill Reading has written about this, all sorts of people have written about this – entails a kind of managerial vision of knowledge that envisions knowledge objects, the production of knowledge, in ways that can be counted,

compared, and the relative efficiencies and relative values assessed. That's a model of formal translation, it's a model of truth, of equivalences, and a model in which equivalences are made between quite different areas. So when earlier I was talking about the pluralism of genres and the consequent pluralism of truth, of modalities of truth-claiming being subordinated to a hidden universal understanding of the disposability of truth by means of genres, this is, if you like, precisely the paradigm that is at work in the management model of the neoliberal university. The hidden but not so hidden universal value is the value of, the market value of, the education. What kind of product is the educated student? How does the production of this or that bit of semantically boundable knowledge, how does that contribute to producing such an also countable object as the well-educated undergraduate consumer? This is all fairly standard, but into this fairly standard and smooth construction, or characterization, of the logic of management and the neoliberal university, into that comes the question of the possible non-translatability of, or untranslatability among, modes of producing knowledge and amongst the objects produced, the knowledge objects produced within the university. This is where Cassin's work seems absolutely necessary. It allows us to insist that the work of the university is not only the work of producing translatable, semantically boundable objects of knowledge, but of continuing the process of negotiating the non-translatability of such knowledge objects amongst different truth regimes. It installs in the logic of the university the need to *compensate*. I mean, it's almost a financial proposition: it's the need to compensate for that second-order reflection which is the reflection upon the non-translatability of objects of knowledge amongst disciplines. That becomes *itself* a necessary constant, irreducible, repeated and eternal part of the university, an incalculable cost but also an unmanageable surplus value. So Cassin's work in that sense opens up the university away from the market-orientated account of the pluralism of knowledge objects that can be understood within this larger framework of their comparability and their translatability in the horizon of the way that they contribute to the production of the consuming individual, and it orients us toward a different conception of the labour of the, in the, university. It makes *that* orientation also part of what the managerial class would call the 'value proposition' of the university: it's a radically intrusive procedure. It can be made and I think that Cassin's work goes in this direction. It needs to, it needs to be, it can be theorized and almost rendered programmatic if we see, if we take the comment you were making earlier about her unwillingness to stick to a genre. From her now extraordinarily powerful public position, she is writing philosophy differently. That means that it's no longer possible to think of philosophy departments and the kind of genre of philosophy writing that is practised within those departments as exclusive to the history of the genre of philosophical writing, because it now must include the way that Cassin is writing autobiographically, semi-autobiographically about themes and projects and problems that are not the classic ones in philosophy departments. Her performance of philosophy is a performance also of the unbounding of the philosophical object and of the philosophical discipline in a way that is consistent with the way that the concept of untranslatability enters into

and ultimately disrupts the tendency toward that kind of formalized, translatable conceptualization of object knowledge production that we get in the neoliberal university.

Oliver Feltham: I was thinking about... I still have this, I'm still fascinated with this sort of almost, well it's not a defined or finite method, but this idea of opening up these unbounded semantic fields and then exploring the contiguity that they have through contested translations of the particular primary text. In your work, I see...because what emerges is this figure of infinity – and obviously for those who fear the sophists, and fear Derrida's work when it started to be translated in and read in Comparative Literature departments across the English speaking university – it's a figure of a 'bad infinity', of infinite regress: we are never going to get to a definition statement or a thesis point. I think that's something that Cassin's work very fruitfully reawakens, that fear of the sophists, because she restores full power to the sophists' discourse by showing how Aristotle failed to demonstrate that their discourse was incoherent, how Plato failed to demonstrate that their discourse is incoherent. So she restores that power. There is this reawakening of this fear. There's also something quite similar in your work in *On the Nature of Marx's Things: Translation as Necrophilology* when you raise this huge question about the use of things. You start to talk about moments in Marx's work when he's talking about Lucretius' grand poem of nature, and in which there is the level of the object of the thing, the level of the discourse or statements about the thing, and then the meta-discourse about that discourse. What seems to be your interest is when those levels converge or conflate or get blurred.

Jacques Lezra: Yes, look, quite, very much so. I'm interested in two things that happen simultaneously. In the description that you just gave of an object discourse, the discourse regarding the object and then the meta-discourse regarding the relation, what occurs in translations is very often, not exactly a blurring, but a collapsing and then a crossing of these discursive domains, which then one can work to re-establish and one *must* work to re-establish in order to keep some kind of minimal coherence to one's statements. If I don't know whether I'm talking about an object or talking about talking about an object, things get extremely messy, and the way that truth claims can be made at each one of those levels is slightly different. The value of the truth that is claimed on each of those different levels is different. When there is this kind of collapse – or the word that I prefer because it's a Lucretian word, *fall*, between these discourses – then the rules of genre, cultural rules, cultural norms, require pulling these discourses back into a more or less perspicuous relation that can be maintained until it falls apart again, or until the discourses fall into each other again. There are different ways of construing that falling together of these different discursive domains. One of them would simply say, it would want to argue, well, this is just what happens when in natural language you try to make claims about things. Natural languages don't have the formal procedure, they don't have the formal strength to allow for a robust distinction to be maintained between

these different levels. So they're going to fall into each other simply because we use natural languages.

This leaves open the historicity of the falling into each other of these different discursive domains. Under what conditions do they fall into each other? What makes that fall have one or another kind of consequence for truth, for society, for conversation? What happens when the falling into each other of these different domains seems to follow a rule, seems to obey a rule, but that rule is itself not part of any of these discursive domains, but is part of, let's say, material, a material frame, in which the language is produced. That's where my work wants the pressure to come: at that level of the question. Where, how and under what circumstances is the swerve into each other of these three discursive domains produced, with what consequences, and what could we draw from that for politics? Let's say that we're ready to agree to something like this: that in conventional politics the order of discourses is maintained by institutions which have a kind of perpetuating and self-perpetuating function, which serve to, which exist in order to produce certain kinds of objects and certain kinds of subjects who can assess the value of those objects and use them in different ways. If this is our very classical and very conventional conception of the relation between politics and institutions, then how do we account in that model for this falling together of discursive orders? Can we generate institutions that are able to take account of the way in which their objects, the objects that they produce and the subjects that they produce, sometimes cross positions, lose their boundaries, become inaccessible and become unnameable within the context of those institutions, at different moments, at different times, and to different effects? This is what my work is trying to figure out now. If the books on *Untranslating Machines*, on *Marx's Things* and necrophilology, if those were projects that really intended to show what it might be like to think about semantic objects as not boundable within particular conditions, now the work is to think about the consequences for constructing commonalities of interest, desire, pleasure and pain, which can be derived from that description of how we handle objects and subjects.

Oliver Feltham: I think it would be obviously very interesting to explore the possibility of an institution of education, of higher learning, that was capable of actually accounting for, or taking responsibility for, the 'world-effects' of its own discourse – what is the effect of the continual use of a certain rhetoric by the university leadership? What effect does that produce on students? – beyond the current concerns with new modalities of politeness and using certain names and pronouns. But going beyond that to, as you say, to moments at which it is the institution itself that is partly responsible for these 'falls' of discourse.

Jacques Lezra: The nature of what that responsibility is... so in, in what ways is an institutional responsible for what befalls in it? That seems to me crucial because, tangentially, you might say, institutions are responsible, are, in fact definitionally, responsible for everything within them, that's the nature of the institution, and that responsibility – well, you have to take account of how objects are produced

within the institution, what is included, what is excluded. Indeed the subjects that the institution produces are just that, entities responsible for and to what's produced *by* the institution. Those are sort of definitional aspects of the institution. An institution works in order to produce this sort of thing by excluding, by including, by producing these kinds of continuities, by affirming the value of certain positions as figures of inclusion, exclusion and production of objects, production of subjectivity and responsibility, and so on. This is the way classic institutions work within that classic meta-institution, which is the modern state. There's an absolute homology between state and university on these grounds. Universities are also a kind of meta-institution in which smaller-order or lower-order institutions function in relative concert under the guidance of, and the over-arching unification procedures of that meta-institution, the University, where these micro-institutions operate. What would it mean to look for modes of institution that are not amenable to being counted, essentially? This is what we're looking for. So that the institutions, like the unbounded semantic objects that we were talking about before, these kinds of positions would be, would have, radically fuzzy edges. Thus many of their principles, of their classic principles, of inclusion and exclusion, the principle of bounding, the principle of coherence, the principle of identity: all of these, which tremble on the edge between the classical logical formulations and the formulations of institutional theory, get changed, right? They have to be abandoned. So you're looking at that point for conceptions of institution which do not remit to a classic logic of identity, sufficiency, coherence, continuity, etcetera, *but* which, *and* which, in not remitting to those, open up toward procedures of inclusion and exclusion of differently defined "objects" of knowledge, or students, or disciplines, or outcomes, that are not the ones that the classic university had, procedures of creating value and devaluing that are not those of the classic institution. So it seems to me this also opens up towards procedures of comparing and relating institutions in ways that are not the translation of those institutions in the context of a meta-institution which makes them countable, if you see what I mean. It's a tall order to produce such a political description of institutions. But I do think that the operators that Cassin is giving us – untranslatability, the sophisticated effect – are major ways of producing precisely that kind of redescription of institutions. This is a very interesting thing to say regarding someone who herself is a member of the most ritualized and classically constituted institution in France, perhaps one of the most formal, in this sense, in Europe (though as I say this I remember the vast machinery of the Church, and I'm forced back from my hyperbole). It's really extraordinary that her thinking, that she can think from within the constraints of those institutions.

Oliver Feltham: When you were talking there about the meta-institution, the modern state and the homology with the modern university, I was thinking about a passage when you're writing about Hobbes and the transfer of rights, and I'm thinking about your attention to early European modernity and the importance of the colonial moment. It seems to be a major thematic in your work.

Jacques Lezra: Yes.

Oliver Feltham: To harp on this theme, there's a phrase that you wrote that really struck me where you talk about translation being both a resource and a limit to European colonial modernity. I was wondering, are there contemporary avatars of that resource and limit, that double identity of translation, that we're still dealing with nowadays as scholars and as citizens?

Jacques Lezra: That's a wonderful question and I'm inclined to answer it in two ways. One is that – and these are related – English, and the universalization of English as the language of trade, economy, even diplomacy, was for the creation of the modern European state both a resource and an obvious limit. It was a resource in as much as it produced an analogue for a common culture, and a common conceptualization of being-in-common that was carried by the English language and by all of the resources of English. It was a limit because it installed a single language as the domain in which that commonality could be imagined and which figured that commonality as remitting to a single language, not just any language, but the language of commerce, of the colony, of the world order as it was established in the course of the 20th century. The same thing could be said about the rise of technology; that is, it serves that same double function of resource and limit as I've just described it. It has the function qua technology of communication, of enabling the transmission of information, of enabling the creation of spontaneous communities, of social communities, as we all know. The limits that are proposed are similarly the limits of the technology, but also the limits of the technological imagination, which is indissociable from the actual technology itself. So it's not only – just as English is not only, the use of English is not only the use of the instrument English, but it's also the acquiescence to the cultural value of English – so the use of technology is not just the use of this or that technological means, it's also a relation to the technological conceptualization of the world that is carried by specific technologies and enables specific technologies. So in both of those ways, I think we have examples of resource-limit couplings. What I think is important is to understand the historical dimension of resource-limit couplings of that sort. It's not the same thing – and I think this goes to the first part of your question – it's not the same thing to speak of a resource-limit couple in the 20th century, to establish how a resource-limit couple works in the 20th and 21st century, as it is to see how that works in the 16th and 17th century. There are certain continuities. We live in the shadow of a kind of colonial idea that is set in place for the West in those years, and that's certainly a continuity. But what counts as resource and what counts as limit are different in the two moments. Although there is an analogy to be drawn between them, it's an analogy with a sufficiently complex and intractably overdetermined set of mediations between what happens in the 16th-17th centuries and what happens today, that the couplet of resource and limitation, although it has a kind of explanatory value for thinking about that moment, is also itself both a resource and a limitation for us today. It's a resource in as much as it allows us to see in early modernity the colonial precursor to the economies that we are embedded

in today, but it's a limit inasmuch as it makes that particular configuration appear to be the cause and the structuring element behind today's colonial configuration: thus putting in the past, the remote past, the origins of something that is constantly being produced and reproduced in the present. It's very tricky because it is a multi-levelled question.

Oliver Feltham: One last question to bring you back to one of your favourite figures, Pico de la Mirandola. It's a simple question. What does – again asking you to bridge, to jump, between different historical epochs – what does, if anything, Pico have to tell us about the human condition?

Jacques Lezra: Pico is offered up as the exemplar of Renaissance humanism, a syncretist, a peripatetic, polypathetic and polymathic thinker who is capable of bringing Plato into dialogue with diverse religions – and who is in that respect an extremely appealing figure. His work – and in particular the work that I've thought about the most, which is the *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, that famous introduction to a set of theses – includes the parable of the human, and of the position of the human, which seems to me useful to us today, because one might say something like this: the human, and the position of humanism, is the last redoubt, it's the last position that is assumed by biopolitical governance. Biopolitical governance and institutional consolidation and the creation of a single world smoothed over by the common application of the laws of capital and the conditions of capital – the last ground upon which those propositions can be defended today is *the human*. So today humanism has been entirely captured in its classical form, that is, by all of the regimes of capture – economic, social, political – that have also gone into the neoliberalization of the university and the creation of the global market of markets that we call globalization. But if you attend to Pico and really get into his conceptualization of the positioning of the human you will find – to my mind at least, I hope so – you will find that the way that he conceives of the human has a great deal to do with what I was earlier describing as the unboundedness, the unbounding, of the semantic object. In Pico, you might say, the couplet resource-limitation is God-human. The plan that God makes for the scheme of the world, a completely regimented and understood plan in which everything has its place and there's a place for everything, excludes the human and very famously, thus in compensation, endows the human with the capacity to make itself part of any of the different positions in the scheme of being. That same description also gives us a sense of what you might call God's weakness, or the debility of the instituting figure, the divine instituting figure. What kind of divinity is it that doesn't have in advance a knowledge of the position that is to be given to the human, to the witness, to the last figure that God produces? Pico is, I think, flirting with very radical heterodoxy there, a heterodoxy that presents us with the image of the divinity that is ignorant of the ends of its project, and doesn't have in advance a sufficiently mathematized view of the project so as to include that last figure, the figure of the human. The heterodoxy with which Pico is flirting here has to do with God's foresight, God's foreknowledge, and thus God's being in time. My sense

is that the last redoubt of the smoothing logics of capital, which is the human, bumps up against the debility of the instituting figure, the debility, the weakness, the heterodoxy, the incompleteness of a God who is able to grant that position of universal mediator and universal equalizer to the human, but only at the expense of installing, of instituting the figure of a God who is incomplete with respect to its temporality and its power. So Pico's very long and very important shadow has too clearly fallen on the side of promoting an idea of the human-as-universal, whereas the shadow also includes this other aspect, which is a concomitant *demotion* or even *derogation*, as it were, of a principle of divine institution and of the institution as divine, as closed, as responsible, and as auto-responsible.

Oliver Feltham: You have finished with the lack in the Other.

Jacques Lezra: I do finish with the lack of the Other.