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Cameron MacKenzie

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Cameron MacKenzie

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THE PERFORMANCE OF NON-PHILOSOPHY¹

CAMERON MACKENZIE

Are we ready for a return to Deleuze? The question might seem odd to the American reader, since the philosopher's influence only continues to grow in the graduate programs that function here as the inculcator of critical theory. It is perhaps inevitable that this most elusive of thinkers has become the favorite among students who mistake the expostulations of *Anti-Oedipus* and *A Thousand Plateaus* as a release from all logical constraints. Given a climate in which the name of Deleuze is all-too-often invoked as justification for the lazy or the inarticulate, the work of Alain Badiou has begun to function as a desperately needed corrective.

But Badiou is not nearly as new or as fresh as he may seem. His first major work, *Theory of the Subject*, was published in France over thirty years ago, and yet the recent growing fascination with Badiou has given birth to a virtual publishing industry, in which even the philosopher's offhanded comments and class lectures merit hardback books (*The End of History, In Praise of Love, Wittgenstein's Antiphilosophy*). For those who have been reading *Being and Event* for nearly 25 years, the recent explosion of Badiou's popularity must itself seem in equal need of a corrective. Enter François Laruelle's *Anti-Badiou: on the Introduction of Maoism Into Philosophy*.

Lauded in the pages of Deleuze and Guattari's *What is Philosophy* for his development of a "non-philosophy," Laruelle follows in Deleuze's footsteps of upsetting less the suppositions of traditional thought than the deep schematics that govern it. Laruelle has developed his non-philosophy as a method by which he can circumvent what he identifies as the fundamental flaw of philosophical thinking: a decision made at the outset of any philosophy that the subject under question, before any analysis, consideration, or even naming, must first be separated from its essence. This process of separation produces not the subject itself but a "specular" version of it, an abstraction more easily manipulated by philosophical thought. This process, inherent to all philosophy, proceeds to think the artificial abstraction it has created through the difference between such an artifice and that which is inevitably left over from the procedure. What philosophy does, in Laruelle's mind, is

¹Review of François Laruelle, *Anti-Badiou: On the Introduction of Maoism into Philosophy*. Trans. Robin Mackay. London: Bloomsbury, 2013.

build a false world, and then wonder at the distance between this fantasy and actual reality. Badiou's apparatus is understood by Laruelle as only the most recent and sophisticated manifestation of the fundamental philosophical fault, and it serves Laruelle chiefly as the most expedient and convenient foil for his own non-philosophy.

Anti-Badiou seems built less as a critique of Badiou—although that critique is performed with something akin to boredom—than a proving ground and scene of demonstration of the principals of non-philosophy. Non-philosophy is presented here, however, as a brand of thinking ostensibly free from any rules of logic, rationality, space, or time. In contrast to philosophic meditations on difference, boundaries, identity and limits, non-philosophy is presented as an open, flowing and “oceanic” way of thinking, or rather of *being*, since to separate one notion from the other would be a traditional philosophical mistake (33).

Following from this, those who come to this book looking for a thorough treatment of the influence of Mao on Badiou's work will be sorely disappointed. Other than a few vague gestures towards the materialist dialectic, Mao is altogether left out of Laruelle's otherwise frothy performance; and it is the notion of *performance* that is central to this text, since any direct treatment, concrete critique, or thorough investigation of Badiou's concepts and the difference between them and those of non-philosophy would, inherently, utilize the terms and procedures of philosophy itself, and thereby be stuck in the illusory world already mentioned. This leaves Laruelle with the burden of demonstrating his non-philosophy.

The text as a whole resembles at times something closer to a polemic or a manifesto, yet it ultimately fails to fully embrace the vitriol or even the focus required for such genres. This is a shame, because Laruelle has many interesting and important things to say. He correctly identifies how Badiou has functioned as a salve for those weary of postmodernism through Badiou's production of to an archaic neo-modernism which, in an acceleration of the traditional modernist's concerns with purity, aims to strip thought of all content through its appeal to the mathematical void as the anchor of philosophy to reality. Badiou's mathematical void is quite troubling for Laruelle; it is too extreme, too “pitiless” to serve as the basis of productive thinking (xii). Recourse to the void as an anchor effectively brings the inhuman force of the count into all arenas of human endeavor that philosophy would examine, elevating the razor of mathematics to an ethical imperative, a “manifesto of terror” that exalts only a cold vacuum that would suck all the various facets of humanity out into a crushing nothingness (xiii).

Laruelle chiefly counters philosophy through recourse to the conditions of quantum theory. While the stakes and repercussions of this choice are not explained to any satisfying degree, the notion of *superpositioning* does feel quite tantalizing, insofar as it ostensibly understands concepts to exist not as independent elements but as the instances of another force altogether outside of thought. Philosophers such as Badiou may feel compelled to separate a

notion of, say, *art*, from a notion of *technology*, *religion* or *politics*, but superpositioning allows all notions to exist concurrently in the same object or moment while still retaining their separate identities; in this way Laruelle can suggest, for instance, that Wittgenstein's drive to connect the word with the real fails because it understands the two elements as points on a continuum, instead of occasions within a manipulatable field.

But such discussions remain tantalizing only, as Laruelle does not take the time to clearly explain superpositioning—his understanding of it or its function in quantum mechanics—and remains content to wave vaguely in its direction, professing that it does or will solve such problems. Of course, any clear demonstration of this and other concepts would necessarily take place on the grounds of philosophy and would thereby be subject to its procedures of abstraction. But if we are, finally, to treat Laruelle's text on its own terms, we must come to understand it as a performance of a singular variety. Take the following passage:

"[Badiou's] inconsistent multiple gives way to a molar materialism of the void, a subtle form of conceptual atomism that destroys the superposition of knowledges and reestablishes the old Platonic style of philosophy—as if humans, the beings who practice the middle way and its indiscernible paths, had to practice it as a space strung between two molar limits, between divine or superhuman inspiration and the body of mathematics, one being unbreathable, the other breathtaking, in both cases because one sought to impose them as necessary and sufficient trajectories of existence." (201)

Leaving aside the interminable length of the sentence, we are forced to ask how a "middle way" can transform into a "space" which is only then mutated into a "string." As to the given limits, why can't inspiration be either "divine" or "superhuman"? Why clutter the sentence with both adjectives, other than to be blatantly indecisive? At this point it is a small quibble that we are unclear as to whether it is the "inspiration" or the "body of mathematics" that is "unbreathable," but the larger quibble is with the trite comparison between the "unbreathable" and the "breathtaking." Rhetorically speaking, the difference is none at all; they are, in fact, grouped together in the next clause as a singular instance that "one" (Badiou?) seeks to impose as both "necessary" and "sufficient."

All this goes to obscure the quite valid point I believe Laruelle is trying to make, which seems to be that Badiou ultimately presents humanity with a false dilemma about whether we should aspire to be adding machines or messiahs.

But when working through ideas such as these, and in step with as rigorous and as subtle a thinker as Badiou, the confusion evident in this passage is remarkable. No doubt intentional. Very well. And yet, if this is the realm in which the text aims to find its footing, we are drawn back to the final pair of "unbreathable" and "breathtaking." It is repetitious, it is rhythmically

unsatisfying, and it brings together the awkward and the clichéd in an attempt to express a classical sublimity. The opposition has the sophomoric ring of bad poetry. It demonstrates a flailing effort at a penetrating turn of phrase, the kind perfected by masters of the discipline, such as Deleuze, who have produced within it works of greatness. But what is this discipline? Is it polemic? Is it manifesto? Is it not, simply, philosophy? That Laruelle is a timely and important thinker is not a question. That this book presents him as a poor explicator of his own ideas, who fails in his attempts to perform them because he possesses neither the ear nor the voice of a powerful writer is all too clearly in evidence throughout this tedious and unreadable book.