

## Book Review

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Jean-Jacques Lecercle, *Badiou and Deleuze Read Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 224 pp.

Jean-Jacques Lecercle's *Badiou and Deleuze Read Literature* is an exploration of the thought of French philosophers Alain Badiou (1937-present) and Gilles Deleuze (1925-1995) from the perspective of their engagements with literature. In terms of its systematic treatment this book is the first of its kind, ambitious in both content and scope. Given its comprehensive nature, however, a full explication is beyond that allowed by the format of a review. I would like simply to summarize its major points, as well as what I perceive to be some of its shortcomings.

Lecercle's introduction begins as follows: "Tell me which literary texts you read and how you read them and I shall tell you what kind of philosopher you are and how important your philosophical contribution is" (1). One would expect Lecercle to proceed by examining the literary works Badiou and Deleuze read, the ways they do so, and assessing the importance of their philosophical contributions on this basis, as well as further arguing for and supporting this claim. He does not. Instead he makes three more claims: 1. Badiou and Deleuze are the two most important contemporary philosophers. 2. They form a unity, a unity in opposition, a "non-relation" that he describes in chapter one as one of "disjunctive synthesis." 3. The best way to enter this non-relation is through their readings of literature since, first, literature plays a crucial role in their respective philosophies and, second, the ways their texts are written is important. Lecercle proposes treating Badiou and Deleuze as poets, examining how their texts work.

These are all interesting if somewhat esoteric claims. However, Lecercle provides remarkably little evidence to support any of them. The style of writing and organization of the introduction is emblematic of *Badiou and Deleuze*. Time and again Lecercle lists theses, giving the book a facile respectability and appearance of organization, for which he argues little. Rather than a sustained argument for a position or treatment of themes, *Badiou and Deleuze* is simply a collection of proclamations on Lecercle's part. Nor does he shy away from employing Badiou and Deleuze's technical vocabulary with little or no explanation along the way. A notable exception

is the first chapter where Lecerclé attempts to explain the “non-relation” that unites Badiou and Deleuze as one of “disjunctive synthesis.”

He begins with a synopsis of the historical background that unites Badiou and Deleuze, the events of May of 1968 and the establishment of the University at Vincennes. It should be mentioned that Lecerclé gives the wrong date of Deleuze’s death, saying that he died in 1996 when in fact Deleuze died in 1995. Lecerclé says that although the differences between Badiou and Deleuze are ultimately unbridgeable, what unites them is their proximity to literature in terms of their styles of explication and close reading (9). He goes on to give a lengthy, rather unhelpful explanation of the difference between analytic and continental philosophy (10-15). This is towards the end of characterizing both Badiou and Deleuze as thinkers hostile towards the tradition of analytic philosophy despite their strong interests in language and literature, hostile to interpreting philosophical problems as ones of language alone. Hence, their convergence can be explained in terms of their common hostility towards analytic philosophy and a shared emphasis on material conditions of philosophy.

Approximately halfway through chapter one Lecerclé turns to the issue of “disjunctive synthesis,” which he introduces in the first instance by referring to Kant (16), saying this concept brings together “series” while at the same time keeping them apart (17). His most helpful characterization of this notion is in terms of Hegel’s thought: a disjunctive synthesis would be the alternative in Deleuze’s philosophy to Hegel’s notion of synthesis as the final movement in the dialectic, one that resolves by uniting contradictions that arise through the interplay of thesis and antithesis (20). This characterization is important not only because it clarifies the meaning of the term but also because Lecerclé describes Badiou as a dialectician in contradistinction to Deleuze. Furthermore, it is this notion that Badiou focuses on in his reading of Deleuze: “He [Deleuze] is accused of reintroducing transcendence through the separation of the event from the ordinary multiple of the situation” (21).

Aside from a brief, rather confusing remark regarding the way in which Badiou thinks Deleuze ultimately attributes diverse modes to the one, as with Lecerclé’s introductory claims little effort is made to either unpack or support this (22). Lecerclé moves on to describe Badiou’s reading of Deleuze as a “strong” one – the meaning of which he returns to in preceding chapters – and has the advantage of turning Deleuze’s thought into a system (26). As a segue into chapter two Lecerclé claims the closeness of Deleuze and Badiou consists in their mutual criticisms of representative democracy and a common passion for literature (33).

Lecerclé begins chapter two asserting that Badiou and Deleuze’s mutual “passion for literature” must be understood in terms of their mutual “passion for the real” (38). Lecerclé then mentions Lacan and a Lacanian

conception of the real (39). As with his other remarks regarding the thought of Lacan, however, Lecerclé never actually cites Lacan. Although Lacan has a substantial entry in the index none of Lacan's works are included in the bibliography. This is just to show that Lecerclé's reading and explication is rather haphazard. For example, he writes that "the central concept of Badiou's philosophy" is "the event as encounter with the real" (40) but never explains what Lacan means by the real such that one could understand Badiou's conception of the event in terms of it.

For Badiou, says Lecerclé, thinking the century is first and foremost thinking its art. Art it is a condition of philosophy as a site for capturing the event and carrying out truth procedures. For Deleuze on the other hand, the purpose of art is to force one to think (41). For both authors literature produces joyful affects and – seems to reason Lecerclé – this unites Badiou and Deleuze as continental philosophers: continental philosophers are writers of texts that produce affects (42). This comprises a conception of philosophy that can be characterized by the following: 1. its militancy, by which Lecerclé means their philosophies intervene in the world, which he further equates with what Deleuze refers to as "experimentation"; 2. a "strong" conception of reading and writing, which involves force rather than form (43).

Lecerclé describes this "strong" reading in terms of Deleuze's description of philosophy as "buggery." He writes the following: "The offspring, the strong reading, is not only monstrous, it is necessary, and the rape turns out to be an expression of love" (44). In my opinion, assertions such as these are emblematic of the hyperbole that makes continental philosophy a laughingstock. Likewise, summarizing the "different styles of the two philosophers in Deleuzian terms," Lecerclé says one could contrast "Badiou's striated with Deleuze's smooth style; or by opposing a plane of reference in Badiou to Deleuze's plane of immanence or of consistency; or again, by opposing Badiou's fixed concepts to the Deleuzian lines of flight, as concepts diverge and merge" (48-49). Although this list certainly demonstrates Lecerclé's knowledge of Deleuze's terminology, it does little to acquaint the unfamiliar reader with the thought of either Badiou or Deleuze.

In chapters three, four, and five Lecerclé attempts to demonstrate this "strong" reading in Deleuze's reading of Proust, Badiou's reading of Mallarmé, and their respective readings of Beckett. He begins chapter three with a list summarizing the six characteristics of a "strong" reading: 1. A strong reading goes against the grain. 2. It extracts a problem. 3. It constructs a concept that grasps this problem. 4. A strong reading is persistent. 5. It results in intervention rather than interpretation – what Lecerclé says is synonymous with shocking the tradition. 6. A strong reading acts as a provocation (68-70). Hence, in contrast to a reading of Proust that emphasizes "the tyranny of the signifier" – by which Lecerclé means something like an emphasis on the text's meaning (74) – what qualifies

Deleuze's reading of Proust as strong is its affirmation of the materiality of language (75), as well the claim that Proust's work is less about memory and more about learning (an apprenticeship) and how the human becomes a subject in the process (78). Lecercle uses these same six criteria to show that Badiou's reading of Mallarmé is strong.

He begins chapter four with an account of the way in which Badiou approaches the poems of Mallarmé: Badiou's reading is a close one, an *explication de textes* in the French tradition (93). Lecercle uses this reading to illustrate Badiou's poetics, which consists of the following four assumptions or axioms: 1. The meaning of a poem is univocal. 2. This univocity is guaranteed by the poem's syntax. 3. Prose takes precedence – evident in the fact that Badiou gives a prose “translation” of the texts of Mallarmé before addressing them. 4. The poem is an enigma and its meaning must be discovered through analysis. This fourth axiom is an encapsulation of the first three (97-99).

These axioms and the Badiouian conception of poetics to which they give rise fly in the face of what literary critics normally understand as poetics. Point-for-point these assumptions run exactly counter to Badiou's. They are as follows: 1. The poem is polysemous – it cannot be pinned down as having one meaning. 2. It is precisely the syntactic structure of the poem that prevents it from having any one meaning. 3. It is impossible to translate the poem into prose. 4. Treating the poem as an enigma whose meaning is to be uncovered is to adopt a simplistic style of interpretation, what Lecercle refers to as a “tin opener” theory of interpretation. Finally, a more broadly accepted understanding of poetics includes a fifth axiom based on the preceding four: 5. The signifier plays a central role – in literary texts language can never be reduced to a mere instrument of communication (99-100). On the basis of these assumptions then Badiou's reading of Mallarmé is a strong one (115-116).

Lecercle says the assumptions that guide Badiou's poetics are indicative of his resistance to the importance of language to philosophical thought. The fact that Badiou upholds the centrality of truth and resists the linguistic turn is further evidence of this tendency. Badiou maintains a strict distinction between poetry and philosophy, claiming “the poem” rather than philosophy “is the site of the production of truths” (106). As is evident from an explanation of the assumptions on which Badiou's poetics rests, however, the poem must ultimately abandon its veiled nature and give way to philosophy's “truth procedures.” Although the poem presents an event it cannot itself be an event (113).

In chapter five Lecercle compares Badiou and Deleuze's respective readings of Beckett. He begins by stating that both authors have a literary cannon, which means Badiou and Deleuze defend a number of writers about whom they write extensively, and that they use this “personal choice” in

turn to discriminate between great and what they reject as “false or doxic art” (119). “Being the result of personal taste and biographical chance...their canons somewhat differ” (119), although their common point of intersection is Beckett (120). The canons of both Badiou and Deleuze are distinctly modern, and what literary modernism supposedly shares with poststructuralist philosophy is a common critique of representation (121). On this basis Lecerclé goes on to describe a paradox in Deleuze’s philosophy, which concerns the latter’s hostility towards metaphor but his frequent use of a “metaphorical style” (123). I find Lecerclé’s analysis of this paradox especially misguided and would like to discuss it a bit further for this reason.

Lecerclé takes Deleuze and Guattari’s characterization of the face in *Thousand Plateaus* as a “black hole and a blank wall” to be indicative of Deleuze’s metaphorical style, as well as their use of “it” at the beginning of *Anti-Oedipus* (“It is at work everywhere...”). This seems to miss completely the thrust of Deleuze and Guattari’s thought. Especially central to these books is a strong critique of anthropocentrism – evident in their general criticisms of psychoanalysis but favorable review of Szondi’s work – and, in turn, the priority given to the personal over the impersonal in philosophy. As opposed to assuming their descriptions of the face refer in the first place to a face being described metaphorically, or that the “It” in *Anti-Oedipus* refers to “the hero of the tale” (128) – as if Deleuze and Guattari had in mind a face or a person and then described these metaphorically – it seems more appropriate to read them as saying the face is literally a black hole and blank wall. This opens in turn to another claim Lecerclé makes regarding Deleuze’s thought. He says that in Deleuze’s philosophy more than anyone else’s the idea of the subject is superseded by multiplicities and pre-individual haecceities (129) – Lecerclé does not, of course, go on to describe what Deleuze means by this. It seems more accurate though to understand Deleuze’s thought in terms not only of a critique of traditional understandings of subjectivity but also a subtle re-conceptualization of this notion on the basis of his conceptions of multiplicities and pre-individual haecceities.

Lecerclé closes this chapter dealing with a criticism of Badiou’s engagements with literature. According to Jacques Rancière, Badiou only finds in literary text his own philosophy, namely, conceptions of the event and its naming. This suggests that, contrary to Badiou’s explicit protestations, the poem cannot think the truth it encrypts but needs philosophy to decrypt this truth. In this way, Badiou reestablishes the superiority of philosophy to art (137-138).

In the final chapter Lecerclé puts Badiou and Deleuze’s “strong” readings to work on texts they do not themselves address, *Frankenstein* and *Dracula*, which fall in the gothic or – what the French refer to as – *le fantastique* genre. Lecerclé is at his best in the first few pages of this

(unfortunately late) chapter. He begins by describing Roger Callois's "The Narwhal and the Unicorn." Callois says the fantastic is to the marvelous what the narwhal is to the unicorn. The horn of the unicorn, a marvelous fictional creature, is in the middle of its head. In this way, the unicorn is sagittally symmetric: if you cut the unicorn down the middle, then the external sides of its body correspond. The horn of the Narwhal, a fantastic real creature, is on the left-hand side of its head. For this reason, the Narwhal is not sagittally symmetric. Since sagittal symmetry is characteristic of most living things, despite its fictional nature the unicorn conforms to and comforts the natural order whereas the Narwhal does not. In this same way, the marvelous conforms to and comforts a given order, whereas the fantastic breaks with and undermines this order (158-160). This background provides the basis for Lecerclé's readings of *Frankenstein* and *Dracula*.

Frankenstein's monster is a fantastic character, while Dracula is not (161). Lecerclé demonstrates this through the imaginative exercise of having these characters fill in a passport application (162). The fantastic character and fantastic texts lead to the destruction of social identities and the worlds that establish them (163). According to Lecerclé, the elements of a fantastic text can be translated into Badiou's theory of the event (164). After an initially promising start, however, Lecerclé's writing and explication once again descend into jargon.

Describing the criteria he will use to assess the value of this reading, Lecerclé writes the following: "Badiou's philosophy of the event will have been fruitfully 'put to work' if it casts a non-trivial light and 'compossibilises' elements of the narrative, on which interpretation stumbles, into a coherent account" (166). At no point does he go on to explain the meaning of the technical vocabulary employed here. He goes on instead to claim that Deleuze finds no value in the fantastic, a conclusion based on an embarrassing bit of reasoning. Deleuze cannot be said to find value in the fantastic because he finds no value in *Frankenstein*. But what leads Lecerclé to conclude that Deleuze finds no value in *Frankenstein*? After all, this is not a text Deleuze discusses, which is precisely Lecerclé's reason for addressing it. Lecerclé bases his evidence on an off-hand remark Deleuze and Guattari make in *Thousand Plateaus* (175). This comment concerns the body without organs and Deleuze and Guattari's criticisms of part-object psychoanalytic theory, where they refer to a list of any part-objects as "Frankenstein." It is obvious even on the most superficial of readings that this comment can in no way be taken as an indictment of *Frankenstein*. Lecerclé nevertheless writes, "We understand why there is no marked interest in the fantastic in Deleuze: the creation of Frankenstein's monster cannot be usefully described as a Deleuze event" (177).

Taking what he interprets to be Deleuze's rejection of *Frankenstein*, Lecerclé goes on to explain Deleuze's rejection of the fantastic in terms of differences between Badiou and Deleuze's conceptions of the event (175).

For Badiou the event is “a radical novelty, a subversion of the order of the world, a hole in the situation” (175). “The Badiou event is a flash of lightning,” whereas “the Deleuze event is a mist” (176). Although this is certainly how Deleuze describes the event in *Logic of Sense*, it is less than clear that Deleuze conceives of the event in these same terms in later works such as *What is Philosophy?* Nevertheless, since Dracula travels as a mist and also becomes an animal, according to Lecerle Dracula is closer to Deleuze than Frankenstein (180). And – in another claim for which neither explanation nor support is given – Lecerle writes, “The vampire is on the side of the body without organs, not of the order of the organism” (182).

Lecerle begins his conclusion saying that neither Badiou nor Deleuze are doing philosophy of literature, as this refers to the analytic tradition (189). In this tradition, philosophy of literature supposes a hierarchy, specifically, that philosophy is somehow higher than or superior to literature (190) such that literary texts would be mere objects of philosophical analysis (191). Instead Lecerle says that what both Badiou and Deleuze are doing might be best described as an aesthetics (192). Despite the fact that neither author is engaged in philosophy of literature, Lecerle says that Deleuze’s analysis in *What is Philosophy?* regarding the difference between the planes on which philosophy and art work (consistency versus composition), as well as the materials with which they work (concepts versus sensations), evidences the philosophical tendency to make hard and fast distinctions between these disciplines (192-193).

In the end, says Lecerle, the ultimate difference between Badiou and Deleuze’s respective engagements with literature can be understood on the basis of their respective philosophies. Whereas Badiou’s philosophy is one of the event, Deleuze’s is vitalistic (203). Although their respective engagements with literature are probably best understood on the basis of their philosophical commitments, describing Deleuze’s philosophy as vitalistic in nature is misguided. Although Deleuze engages with the likes of Spinoza, Nietzsche, and Bergson whose philosophies could be described as vitalistic, this is to overlook the considerable attention Deleuze and Guattari give in *Anti-Oedipus* to the difference between vitalism and mechanism, and their attempts to steer away from both.

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