Non-Axiomatic Pedagogy (Review of Anthony Paul Smith, Laruelle: A Stranger Thought)

Anthony Paul Smith

Laruelle: A Stranger Thought

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In ten years from now Laruelle will have been heavily anthologized, translated, and commented upon, and Anthony Paul Smith will be justifiably revered as one of the pillars of the French non-philosopher's reception in the English-speaking world. After numerous key translations and two monographs, Smith has now written an engaging book which will be *instrumental* for anyone who has wished to take up the heavy cross of non-philosophy. More generally, this book is a vital addition to curricula of philosophy, theology, and arts programmes that train future generations of continental scholars and creative and critical minds in both theory and arts. More particularly, the book will be of high interest for scholars in as diverse fields as critical race studies, philosophy of religion, and especially Gnosticism as they (will) intersect with non-philosophy.

Not every introduction is strictly pedagogical, and not every pedagogy is original. In Smith's case, pedagogy is political engagement. The book reads as both a handbook and introduction, and as exegetical literature. Smith's writing is not confined to drafting and limiting Laruelle's reception: he lets his theological background interfere productively with matters of interpretation.

Laruelle: A Stranger Thought offers the following dogma of non-philosophy: it is always stranger than philosophy. This is not merely a syntactic bifurcation of *l'etranger*. Smith has set himself a very specific agenda, and it is "to show what can be done with non-philosophy and let that doing speak for itself" (8). The book is divided into two major parts. Part I is a general introduction to Laruelle's pre-history with and among deconstruction and psychoanalysis. It presents an account of his theory of philosophical decision, and an incursion into the "style" of non-philosophy. The first two chapters of part 1 are a synoptic outline of some of the most challenging and fundamental aspects of non-philosophy. From now on it will be extremely

difficult for skeptics of non-philosophy to complain about “understanding” Laruelle. Smith’s careful evangelism in Part I is a testimony to the praxis of Laruelle’s thought (though praxis and politics should not be seen as interchangeable), which is often sidelined due to his iconoclastic approach to syntax and style: and syntax is, after all, the “reorganization of thought itself” (2). These two chapters reveal the relevance of Laruelle’s thought not to the “world,” but to “a” world teeming with philosophical overdetermination and ordered after the principle of sufficient philosophy. Smith’s main argument is that while decision is the *via negativa* of doing non-philosophy, its style is the kataphatic prayer ahead of non-standard thinking. This initial dualism is the modus of so called “thinking in-One,” where the One is never topologically situated (42).

Part 2 (chapters 3-7) demonstrates an innovative approach to the very genre of writing introductions. Smith has decided to follow Laruelle’s own self-periodization (Philosophy I-V) but deviates from a historical approach. Instead, he explores the topics that define this periodization. Following Laruelle’s quantum way of thinking, Smith divides the next five chapters by suggesting that they are “waves”, or/and the particles, of non-philosophy. These five chapters are extended commentaries on the following five topics found in Laruelle: politics, science, ethics, arts, religion. The objective pursued is the production of “unified theories.” None of those five areas have the aim to unearth anything about “philosophy,” except partially the first area of politics (see Chapter 3). Most importantly, Smith explains the equivocation of politics and philosophy and that “decision” is their common ground. Without such an understanding one cannot pursue the positive project of “democracy (of) thought” or understand “non-Marxism.” Smith captures the *Zeitgeist* by calling Laruelle an “outsider to the outsiders” (62) who pursues “the possibility of organizing philosophical thought to be democratic or communist in itself” (68). Laruelle does embrace the equivalence of communism and democracy.

Having explained Laruelle’s *adieu* to philosophy, Smith is free to offer his own didactic musings on non-philosophy. The next step is the production of the notion of “generic identity,” which is the political counterpart of Laruelle’s notion of “science”: science here is simply a posture to the Real, or, “the production of thought” (87). Now that Laruelle has established a *modus vivendi* of a democratic thought outside of philosophy, accommodated by science’s generic identity, Chapter 4 introduces science as a humane form of thinking, a practice more human(e) than philosophy. Once science can offer a non-philosophical locus of production, in Chapter 5 Smith turns to addressing the ethics begotten by such scientific practices, and in particular how Laruelle responds to the question of the “human” (see the very original use of “blackness” as a discussion of the notions of “victim” and “stranger”). Chapter 6 will be particularly useful for anyone outside academia looking for a way to engage creatively with Laruelle, as it unpacks his toolkit named “philo-fiction” (later “science-phiction”). Smith explains that the irreducibility of the One cannot dictate our muteness about it. The way Laruelle breaks the spell on the ancient One is to fictionalize and fabulate it, and thus produce an aesthetics. It is exactly the

One's (the Real's) finite inexhaustibility that guides the stranger to the road ahead: to counter-create the world, to "disempower the world" (120) by manifesting the fabula of the One. Finally, since a contact zone for the human and the One is now delineated, Chapter 7 turns to anthropological and religious questions. This is done through so-called "human fictions." As with his non-Marxism, where the goal is to strip Marx of Marxism's philosophical interpretations, a similar return to Christ as opposed to organized Christianity is performed. Thus, the ethos of the mystic Laruelle is, Smith explains, that a Christology outside Christianity is possible (just like the victim can survive philosophical victimology). There have been many returns to "Christ himself," but here Christ is a victim-in-person, a "material" (145). Laruelle claims non-philosophy is gnosis, which is why it is of no surprise that his gnosis entails hatred of the world; but it is hatred that can change the world, and is political. In short, to the world, non-philosophy's gnosis opposes Christ and/as the human-in-person (156).

Smith speaks in his own voice throughout, but in the Conclusion he blends that voice with a summation of non-philosophy with regards to its future and as a response to the specific apocalyptic appropriation of Laruelle, which (as Smith implies in many passages) denudes him of political viability. Although "the future comes regardless," Smith intones with a kind of kataphatic despondence about the possible (and wholly contingent) non-futurity of non-philosophy (168). The entire project of introducing Laruelle to a wider audience can perhaps be reduced to the programme of the human-in-person and her suffering against reification; reification is simply a philosophical reflex of re-establishing the principle of sufficient philosophy each time it is endangered. Smith proposes that the Future is the primal name of the Human (170). His kataphatic despondence is a personal extension of Laruelle's anti-theodicy of the world. The latter should not be confused with its "end" and thus the resurfacing of some anti-natalism. For Smith, the mode of non-future is the modality of a heretical subject, always descending from the One.

Let me try and summarize the merits of Smith's work, and one potential line of criticism. First, he manages to offer a reading of Laruelle competing with that of Ray Brassier and in many ways concurrent to the one of Katerina Kolozova. With due respect and uncompromising micropsia, Smith challenges Brassier's rendition of the non-philosophical credo as one whose heart lies in the "axiom." Second, Smith also wrests Laruelle away from anti-natalist and millennarist ideologies of extinction, and what he wittily calls "Anglo-pessimism." Third, a novel approach to non-philosophy *and* politics (31 ff.), which is again connected to Brassier's "axiomatic Laruelle" where the emphasis goes to explaining, at best, the non-politicalness of non-philosophy and its dubious enthronement among the ranks of "philosophies of difference." One important aspect of Brassier's interpretation had been the subsumption and relegation of Laruelle's mysticism to a very specific brand of European *philosophical* nihilism (of which Brassier dissociated himself by now). While "axiomatic" does convey the sense of a political retention which often dramatically disengages with a certain liberal bravado on "minorities," with his *examples* Smith's interpretation offers "politics" as an external substratum of the

world to which non-philosophy can and should respond. The way Smith sidelines dark vitalist and eliminativist re-hashings of non-philosophy returns the latter to its odd (non-)humanist core: that is, the relation between the One and the Human outside the bonanza of philosophy. For, just like “the Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27), so philosophy is made for man, and not the other way around. It has to be said that this is not a naïvist return to a paradoxical anthropomorphism at the heart of non-philosophy, but a reinstatement of Laruelle as the predecessor of today’s anti-correlationist credo (see also 84) shared among anti-Kantian enthusiasts, which is why Smith points out that Laruelle’s discovery of the principle of sufficient philosophy has exposed correlationism some thirty years before speculative realism.

This third merit of the book is that it is vulnerable to political disagreements in interpreting Laruelle, especially his early work. Smith performs a sort of politicization of non-philosophy – both implicit and explicit - which carries the sense that there are little to no political instrumentalizations of this branch of thought so far. To his credit, he engages with other preceding theorists that might be deemed “politicizations of non-philosophy.” The opening of political avenues done by Smith for future non-philosophers in an introductory reading such as this one is propagandist work, and one implemented brilliantly at that, but it carries the sanitizing presumption that Laruelle resists a politics of non-philosophy from the moment he has found refuge in his notion of “science” – and that it is our work to figure out the politics of his science thenceforth. I am not sure something of the kind is shared among other receivers of Laruelle. Sure, there might be a good reason to think so: if the non-philosophical method is reliant on an inversion of representative politics, however revolutionary, communist and egalitarian it is, that politics will be a semblance of a “decision” taken in the name *of* some-one, not *by* that some-one. But whatever Smith’s originality conveys, the examples he gives are precisely *examples*: they remain examples of theoretical intersections, not recipes of political cohabitations. There is no demand for the founding of a movement – faced with the non-causality of such didactic spirit, the “weak ontology” of Vattimo’s atheistic religiosity could appear quite pretentious. Nor is anywhere Smith inclined to impart a sort of moral call or obligation (see esp. 18) addressing Laruelle’s readers to engage with any of the avenues he has pursued throughout the book. It is as if Smith has written a handbook without ethics, which might be one of the great qualities of this work.

In this way, the book maintains a central problem of the ongoing reception of Laruelle: namely, how to do politics with non-philosophy, be it Marxist, non-Marxist, or any other political conjugation of non-philosophy. I do not believe Laruelle himself knows that, or wants to hand out instructions, which is why it is hard to judge other people’s interpretations of the political attributes of his work. While Smith’s discussions of non-philosophy and civic movements such as Black Lives Matter, critical race theory and afro-pessimism are extremely useful, as soon as the reader would expect he will explore the political futurity of the examples he had rehearsed, Smith adopts a despondent vision flirting with a radiant contingency. An original interpretation

such as Smith's should not presume that Laruelle's obviations on politics are always *ante*-political, because Laruelle himself remains (perhaps purposefully) naïve *and* indifferent about politics. The lesson to be learned here is that the subjective take on the finite-inaccessible One forces us into originality which is an irredeemably fractalized version of Oneness. In short, originality forces us back into the embrace of decisionism, only to fall back into the abyss of the asubjective human-in-One as always already political. It is exactly a problem such as this that demonstrates that we have been decisively introduced to what can be termed the "second stage of non-philosophy." As one of the mavericks of this stage, Smith will remain one of its inspired evangelists by saying: "that non-philosophy is *philosophically* fruitless is indeed the good news proclaimed here" (9). This good news is indeed strange. But the point of being a non-philosophical stranger is to resist alienation, not the world per se, because to be stranger is to ultimately be (more) human(e).

Creative exegesis is typical of representatives of the slowly growing Anglophone non-philosophical community. *Laruelle: A stranger Thought* embodies this manner of productionist diversion into originality rather than mere commentary on the "truth of non-philosophy." This way of approaching Laruelle is central to his reception as it already manifests the receiving of one very specific feature of his thought: so-called "generic identity," which refuses all embodiments and examples. Once the generic plane is interiorized by the non-philosopher, at least one dogma of non-philosophy has been accommodated: that is, the radical humanism of generic indifference to the world. This dogma is the strongest political asset of non-philosophy and Smith not only demonstrates, but institutes it.

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