



Deleuze and Badiou as Disjunctive Synthesis: Lecercle on Philosophy and Literature in Recent French Thought

LECERCLE, Jean-Jacques, *Badiou and Deleuze Read Literature*,
Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2010, 213 p.

Jean-Jacques Lecercle's *Badiou and Deleuze Read Literature* opens with a provocative gambit. Lecercle writes: "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." It is not a philosophy *of* literature that Lecercle proposes. Rather than taking literature as the subordinate object of philosophical reflection, his text engages them as mutually enriching in their singular potentials. The argument Lecercle offers regarding the centrality of literature in the philosophical endeavors of post '68 continental philosophy is a compelling one. Whether his subsequent claim, what he calls his 'first thesis', that Badiou and Deleuze are the definitive figures of this philosophical moment is equally convincing, is less certain. Lecercle is well aware that this is, in his own words, a *contentious wager*, but in the chapters that follow he argues convincingly that his positioning of Deleuze and Badiou as the two organizing poles of the field of contemporary French thought is justifiable. Lecercle's 'second thesis' is that Deleuze and Badiou participate (in Deleuzian terms) in a 'disjunctive synthesis,' or, as Badiou has described it, a synthesis that separates. Their works form opposing terms in a synthesis that continually reaffirms the separation between them. The 'third' and final thesis that Lecercle proposes returns us to his opening line, namely that the best way to begin to understand the (*non-*)*relation* between Badiou and Deleuze is through the way that they read literature.

The first part of the book deals in an introductory manner with the well-known clashes, both personal and philosophical, between Deleuze and Badiou, tracing relevant biographical details and setting up the fundamentals of their philosophical opposition. A short detour offers a 'tongue-in-cheek' analysis of the distinctions between analytic and continental philosophy, increasing the sense that this is in many ways an introduction to the philosophical moment to which Deleuze and Badiou belong. The real substance of this section is Lecercle's development of the concept of 'strong reading' that will prove productive throughout the text as a point of departure for mapping the intersection between Deleuze and Badiou and, more broadly, the distinctive characteristics of a 'philosophical' reading of literature. 'Strong readings,' according to Lecercle, are marked by a certain violence in their rejection of *doxa*; they generate problems

and construct concepts to address them; they are characterized by persistence (the productive rather than conclusive function of a strong philosophical reading); they carry out interventions rather than interpretations, and finally they are provocative for the reader. This concept of strong, philosophical reading structures his own engagement with Deleuze and Badiou's treatment of literature.

Chapters 3 and 4 provide brief glosses of Deleuze's reading of Proust and Badiou's reading of Mallarmé respectively, before proceeding to the more in-depth analysis of their different ways of reading literature. Lecerle concludes that Deleuze reads for *style*. The familiar Deleuzian concepts of a-grammaticality, stuttering and straining toward the limits of language all belong, Lecerle explains, to this concept of style. The analysis of Badiou's reading of Mallarmé notes the axioms that structure Badiou's approach, most importantly that there is only one truth operative in any given work of art and it is guaranteed by syntax. Lecerle describes Badiou's aggressive and restrictive style of reading as *difficult to accept*, but he ultimately acknowledges its productivity in yielding results. The very core of Badiou's reading style, however, is that he does not merely read literature, he is read by it, and it is in this paradoxical mode that the truth and its relation to the *vanished event* can be considered. Deleuze and Badiou not only share a method of strong reading, they also share a modernist canon, a characteristic that Lecerle explores at length. But while Badiou's readings are characterized by 'fidelity to the event' and 'exploitation', Deleuze focuses on answering the question, how does it work?

In the next section, Lecerle carries out his own 'strong reading', using Deleuze and Badiou to examine the 'fantastic'. *Frankenstein* and *Dracula*, two texts that are nowhere considered at length by either Deleuze or Badiou, form the basis for this enquiry. Through Badiou, Lecerle reads *Frankenstein* as the staging of an event. While *Dracula*, despite Lecerle's admission that it is composed of 'trivial clichés and grossest rhetorical tropes,' is examined through the lens of the Deleuzian event. Lecerle's analysis of the 'fantastic' in relation to Deleuze and Badiou is a less productive segment of the book, and it seems at times to fall into the very subordination of literature to a philosophy that makes use of it, which is critiqued throughout the text.

Badiou and Deleuze Read Literature is a timely exploration of the intersection between literature and philosophy in the French continental tradition. Lecerle's skillfully crafted text offers penetrating analyses with a clarity and ease of articulation born of long familiarity with the works that he engages. At times a more introductory text, it nonetheless offers rich material for the consideration of why and how philosophy needs literature.

Caitlyn DOYLE
Northwestern University