

REVIEW

JON ROFFE, *BADIOU'S DELEUZE* (ACUMEN, 2011)

James Williams

I cannot easily resist the guilty pleasure of lingering on a bad review of a good book. If the reviewer also manages to be unwittingly comical while secreting bile, then so much the better. There are few more effective antidotes to life among knaves than witnessing their tumbles. So I was delighted to read Bruno Besana's recent review of Jon Roffe's *Badiou's Deleuze* in *Notre Dame Philosophical Review*¹ just before the deadline for this piece. For the connoisseur, his review is the epitome of the genre, stealthily stirring curdled praise into poisonous dismissal.

My private enjoyment was perhaps tickled best by the curious expression 'analytic fury' used to describe Roffe's style of interpretation. There is of course no fury at all in *Badiou's Deleuze*. Instead, Roffe's careful analysis of Badiou's text in terms of arguments, grounds and implications is labeled as fury solely because it is rigorous, thorough, critical, and based on close analysis of textual evidence. It is only fury if sustained critical analysis that arrives at conclusions we disagree with is somehow seen as extreme. As we shall see, the disproportionate violence is in Besana's reaction to the conclusions, not in Roffe's means to arrive at them.

An affective portrait is perhaps justified when dealing with, say, the relentless pursuit of a whale, but less so when the chase involves a philosophical study of statements and their original sources. Roffe succeeds in giving us the most detailed account of Badiou's many readings of Deleuze, from his more sketchy comments, early and late, to his book-length study in *Deleuze: The Clamour of Being*. The critical edge to this account comes from the cross-examination of Badiou's versions of Deleuze's philosophy alongside the original texts. It is certainly a cautious and painstaking undertaking, the result of many years' investigation, but it is about as furious as a retired vicar pruning roses on a pleasant autumn evening.

Besana adds other strange qualifications around the use of analysis in Roffe's book. Roffe is said to give us a 'deluge' of textual evidence in a 'ferocious' text. For Besana this flood of proof is obviously not fair game for an academic work. Like 'analytic fury', the 'deluge of evidence' is in fact a three-sided sign when deployed by Besana. It designates Roffe's commitment to detailed analysis: something of a compliment. It portrays this virtue as somehow twisted and ill-intentioned: something of an insult. Finally, since there is no fury and little rain in the book, it allows a glimpse of the reviewer's poorly concealed dislike: a comic moment. When combined the three aspects seep into one another. Close analysis becomes suspect and tendentious. The suspicion then justifies the reviewer's dislike. Fortunately, once the trick is revealed, that judgment is shown to be baseless.

In Amis and Amis's classic guide to the inimical review² many basic moves are outlined as the foundations for a successful destruction of a good book. I want to focus on the first and most basic move. It is essential, they say, never to meet the target book on its own ground, while giving the impression of the exact contrary. Like agile musketeers, reviewers must accomplish the difficult pass of moving the action to a site better-suited to their skills and true intentions while maintaining the image of the upright and noble swordsman loyally keeping to the chosen field and its rules.

So how does Besana switch from academic study to fiction? His method is to attribute aims and statements to Roffe that are never stated in his book. This is partly achieved by slippage between single and double quotation marks. A quick reading of the following passages from Besana's review might lead us to believe that Roffe's book is explicitly about Badiou's 'mistakes', 'correct' readings of Deleuze, and Badiou's status as 'sloppy thinker': 'what a 'correct' reading of Deleuze supposedly is'; 'reasons that lead Badiou to such 'mistakes''; and the creation of 'Badiou, the sloppy thinker'. None of these are quotations from Roffe, though, since his original passages are only given in double-quotation marks in Besana's text.

Besana's single quotation marks are in fact only indicators of emphasis. They do not signify direct attribution but are rather underscored invention. The picture of Badiou as sloppy thinker, of an author seeking the only correct reading of Deleuze and of an uncovering of mistakes is strictly Besana's and requires scare quotes exactly because it has no basis in evidence. The slip from correspondence to fiction allows him to combine outrage and a set of tough conclusions about the failure of Roffe's work: 'The point is that this book displays a set of perspectival distortions that make a fictional character of Badiou, at least as strange as the fictional character that Badiou makes of Deleuze.'

The problem is that both characters are manufactured by Besana. Roffe's book has nothing to do with the *figures* of Deleuze or Badiou. It is instead a close study of their *texts* which seeks to track a series of claims, arguments and sources in order to examine a set of conclusions. It would be quite possible to anonymise those texts (candidate A and candidate B) and Roffe's assessments would still hold true. This is not the case for Besana, since he is involved in a much more tendentious form of debate around mythical figures and within a ruthless politics of purification: 'These books are the ones against which we should unleash the most violent, deadly force of polemics, in a fashion analogous to a revolutionary process which—as Badiou states—can only proceed through the construction of a real novelty by identifying and “exterminating” internal adversaries, rather than focusing on external enemies.' Though it is amusing to uncover Besana's devices, it is chilling to witness such naked politicking and inappropriate choice of words.

Roffe's book is exemplary in its scholarship. For instance, unlike many recent works on Deleuze and on Badiou, it has extensive footnotes charting most of the secondary literature in a critical and balanced manner. Roffe justifies each of his claims with careful referencing. He notes differences in possible interpretations and discusses contrasting views. Critical counter-positions and flaws in his own arguments are also given plenty of space. Roffe follows multiple claims and evolving arguments over periods and books, interviews and articles, and within each text. Where there are doubts about his readings, these are raised and addressed. At present, *Badiou's Deleuze* is therefore the definitive account of the statements and arguments at play in the encounter

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between the two thinkers. It might displease some that he demonstrates that statements made in Badiou's work find little support in Deleuze's writings. The onus is on them to show where Roffe draws the wrong conclusions. They should do so on the basis of evidence rather than chimera.

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NOTES

1. Bruno Besana, *Jon Roffe's Badiou's Deleuze*. Notre Dame Journal of Philosophical Review, 2012:08:12, <http://ndpr.nd.edu/news/32607-badiou-s-deleuze-2/>
2. Amis and Amis, *The Dagger Is Mightier Than the Sword*. Rotherhithe: Brutus Press, 1972.