

IAN JAMES, *THE NEW FRENCH PHILOSOPHY* (POLITY 2012)  
Ashley Woodward

*The new is old.*  
Jean-François Lyotard

Were I not already familiar with some of the author's previous work, I would have approached a book with a title such as this with more wariness. For those not so familiar, perhaps some consideration of such wariness would be useful. The above epigraph is a good indication: Lyotard is commenting here with some irony apropos of the postmodern, once itself the 'new French philosophy' which the *now* new French philosophy of this book's title claims to supersede. The uptake of the postmodern in the Anglophone academy was of course notorious for a variety of reasons, but this book's title brings to mind the tendency, perhaps primarily among young philosophers and other academics, to read the proclamation of the new as the obsolescence of the old: now that we are postmodern, we can dispense with the moderns, with Descartes, Kant, Hegel, Marx, etc. (As if that were ever Lyotard's position; as if his development of the postmodern did not coincide with his return to a close engagement with Kant, and so on). The attraction of this tendency, of course, is that it saves a great amount of time (and effort) if we don't need to read anyone but the latest thinkers; if they have done that work for us, and can report that the old thinkers are wrong. It saves us a lot of reading, a lot of thinking. And as Lyotard also once noted, the problem with thinking in a capitalist society is that it is a waste of time.

So the danger the book's title makes me think of is this: that it might be possible for a new generation of apprentice philosophers to believe that a simple line might be drawn in the sands of time, separating the old deconstructionists, the postmodernists, or (more broadly) the correlationists from the new French philosophers, the speculative realists, the object-oriented philosophers, or whomever is supposed to be the new philosophical avant-garde. And more, that this book, insofar as it offers a concise introduction to what is supposedly new in philosophy, seems to offer itself as an economical way to save time, and save us from thinking by clearly making this line.

This view of the nature of the new in thought is of course a myth. This myth can perhaps be exploded, briefly and taking a single example, by considering the recent fashion for the object, in the form of object oriented ontology. A glance back to Jean Baudrillard, that other infamous postmodernist, reveals that his entire project centred on the attempt to break from the philosophy of the subject and to think the object, and that his initial inspiration derived from none other than the existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre, in the famous passage in *Nausea* describing Antoine's encounter with the tree root.<sup>1</sup> As this example shows, the genealogies of philosophical thought are in fact complex, and often belie both the attempts of philosophers to stake out the novelty of their own ideas against schematic summaries of their philosophical heritage, and the typically even cruder cultural receptions of those ideas.

So much for the reasons to be wary. Fortunately, none of them find sustenance in the book itself. I introduce this review by foregrounding them only in order to better highlight the book's achievements in avoiding these dangers, and in offering the reader something far more interesting and valuable. For those not familiar with his previous work, *The New French Philosophy* is the latest of Ian James's introductions to French philosophers, which have previously included works on Pierre Klossowski, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Paul Virillio. Like his previous achievements, the new volume is a remarkably clear, accessible, and rigorous introduction to the work of very challenging thinkers.

*The New French philosophy* contains chapters providing introductory overviews of the work of seven major contemporary French philosophers: Jean-Luc Marion, Jean-Luc Nancy, Bernard Stiegler, Catherine Malabou, Jacques Rancière, Alain Badiou, and François Laruelle. Each of the chapters is essentially a very clear introduction, but also includes occasional comparisons with other thinkers in the volume as well as brief but typically insightful critical comments (for example, James notes that Stiegler's politics may also be open to the criticisms Rancière levels at Althusser). Importantly, the book also includes an introduction and conclusion staking out a thesis regarding what unites these diverse thinkers, and justifies the claim that collectively they represent a new turn in French thought.

The previous book to which James's is closest is John Mullarkey's *Post-Continental Philosophy: An Outline* (Continuum, 2006). Like Mullarkey James discusses Badiou and Laruelle, but not two other thinkers to which Mullarkey gives central place, Gilles Deleuze and Michel Henry (though Henry's central theme of the auto-affection of the flesh receives some treatment by James via Marion's uptake). Mullarkey's argument concerning the new in "post-continental" philosophy centers on the theme of immanence (taking over from the transcendence-immanence dyad of "continental" philosophy). While this theme plays an important role in James' discussion (and the book 'broadly reaffirms Mullarkey's arguments' (5)), he construes the key concerns of the new French philosophy more broadly, as follows:

The argument of this book is that, beginning in the 1970s, the French philosophers discussed all, in different but decisive ways, make a break from the thought of the preceding generation. ... [they] explicitly distance themselves from the linguistic paradigm which informed much of what has gone under the name of structuralism and post-structuralism ... in the name of a systematic attempt to radically rethink questions of materiality and the concrete ... worldliness, shared embodied existence and sensible-intelligible experience ... the 'real', ... world appearance ... or to re-engage in new and highly original ways with the question of ontology. (4)

More briefly, the key defining points of the new French philosophy that James keep coming back to are *the rejection of the linguistic paradigm*, and *the affirmation of the real in a materialist ontology*. In addition, he highlights the ways that these philosophers typically try to move beyond the perceived impasses of the post-structuralist generation by renovating notions of *the subject and its agency*, and the possibilities of *real social and political change*. Of course, these themes are taken up in radically divergent ways by the various thinkers treated in the book.

Despite the clarity and boldness of James' thesis of a new movement in French philosophy, his claims are suitably nuanced (and hence, the dangers initially indicated are avoided). James resists any simple assimilation of the new French philosophy to a generational difference, noting that of the thinkers included only Stiegler and Malabou are young enough to be clearly of a different generation to their poststructuralist predecessors (3). Furthermore, he resists any construal of the new French philosophy as a decisive break or eruption of radical novelty with respect to the past, but rather as a 'broad shared paradigm of renewal and innovation' (8). As James clearly notes, then, 'the continuities and discontinuities with which this study engages are both multiple and complex' (9). Significantly, to my mind, the philosopher who emerges from these pages as perhaps the key intellectual influence from the previous generation – a philosopher without whom much of the new French philosophy would not have been possible – is the one who has perhaps most recently and conspicuously disappeared from the roster of the fashionable in the Anglophone world: Jacques Derrida. The works of Marion, Nancy, Stiegler, Malabou, and Laruelle all emerge from these pages as deeply indebted to Derridean deconstruction, whatever the points of departure from Derrida's own work they evince. One of the surprising lessons of the book, then, is that we are far from being done with Derrida: if we are to understand and engage with the new French philosophy, we must engage (again) with deconstruction.

James's general thesis allows a systematic approach to each of the thinkers he presents: he explains their thought in terms of how they break from the linguistic paradigm and develop their own new forms of materialism and agency. This approach allows for significant novelty and insight, even for thinkers (such as Badiou or Rancière) who have already received copious introduction in English. A major strength of the book is its philosophical approach: it seeks out the most basic arguments, principles, and commitments of each thinker, and demonstrates how they inform the more complex developments of their work. James also takes the trouble to show how each, despite their novelty, is anchored in the philosophical tradition, and sometimes cites some of the most classic texts of Western philosophy in explaining the ideas from their first principles. The difficult balance of concision, accessibility, and rigour in James' approach is quite striking.

The brilliance of the book shines through particularly in the chapter on Laruelle, which is far more perspicuous than some earlier English introductory overviews. Where others seem to struggle with this material (and it is undeniably difficult; even Derrida reportedly complained of the difficulty of Laruelle's writing), and apologise for presenting non-philosophy in a philosophical guise, James' treatment is decisive and insightful, confidently and clearly explaining key terms, concepts, and distinctions, and demonstrating not just a firm grasp of Laruelle's thought, but of the philosophical tradition in and against which it works.

James describes Laruelle's intervention as a series of certainly highly debatable, but plausible moves, concerning the enterprise of philosophy and the nature of thought itself: Laruelle critiques philosophy as transcendental thought which seeks impossibly to ground a conceptual grasp of the real, and repositions the real as the causal condition of thought as such. Nevertheless, the reader may well still wonder what exactly Laruelle's non-philosophy looks like, and what it is supposed to accomplish. James emphasizes Laruelle's ongoing commitment to the democratization of thought, accomplished by non-philosophy because all philosophy has an equally contingent relation to the real. This allows all philosophies to become material for non-philosophy to 'clone,' and authorizes a radical call to inventions of new forms of thought (178). And yet, surely the same is accomplished by forms of relativism and perspectivism, including some forms of the philosophies of difference that non-philosophy is proposed to replace. What would have been useful here would have been an example or two of what the non-philosophical deployment of philosophical concepts can do, and what it is supposedly capable of achieving that philosophy is not.

As noted above, key organizing themes of the book are the break with the linguistic paradigm and the invention of a new materialism. As Dominic Smith suggested to me, we might see the development of French philosophy as series of displacements in transcendental reasoning. James's thesis adds a new chapter. So roughly, we have seen the transcendental considered as consciousness (phenomenological existentialism), as language (structuralism), and now as *material* conditions of some kind. Of course, this potted summary can easily become

misleading, and it is worth pointing out, despite James's care to be nuanced with this, just how misleading it might be. James notes that many of the thinkers discussed mount important arguments against the linguistic paradigm, criticizing the thesis of the closure of language and seeking to think the material real. Yet the critique of this linguistic paradigm may already be found in some of the key post-structuralist thinkers (and arguably, this is in fact what distinguishes them from structuralists and justifies the "post"), for example Derrida's *Of Grammatology* (1967), Lyotard's *Discourse, Figure* (1971), and Baudrillard's *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (1973). Moreover, we also find in many of these thinkers a concern with the real, matter, and the concrete; for example, the libidinal materialism espoused by Deleuze and Guattari and Lyotard in the early 1970s.

These complexities need to be borne in mind. Nevertheless, James's thesis of a new French philosophy is arguably defensible insofar as *emphasis* goes. While philosophers such as Derrida, Lyotard, and Baudrillard all arguably draw attention to the limits of language and structuralist analysis, they remain in many respects thinkers of limits, and of language, and can seem to be limited thereby. That is, they accept to a large extent the transcendental power of language to condition thought, and the closures of metaphysics and ontology announced in the works of philosophers such as Heidegger, Levinas, and Adorno. What remains to thought, for many of the poststructuralists, is a difficult negotiation, an attempt to resist the various closures and impasses of thinking whilst accepting at a large degree the force of such closures. In contrast, the *new* French philosophy James presents might perhaps better be characterized not simply by the break with the linguistic paradigm and affirmation of materialism, but by the degree of boldness and invention with which such moves are carried out. What we see in these more recent thinkers, then, is an attempt to bypass or demolish the obstacles which kept poststructuralist thought unduly limited. To take just one example, Malabou, while deeply influenced by Derridean deconstruction, develops a principle of material plasticity as a conditioning power, and in so doing employs metaphysical and ontological terms (such as 'form' and 'presence') which Derrida would have insisted need to be avoided, or placed under erasure. As James notes, Malabou would defend her position by insisting that her plasticity is prior to and deeper than Derrida's *différance* and related notions (94; 108).

In her book *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing* (2005), Malabou argues that the paradigm of writing as that which informs thought must now give way to the paradigm of material plasticity. This argument is emblematic of the move away from the linguistic turn evident in all the philosophers discussed by James. However, one might note a possible tension here; James notes a form of this tension in Rancière, but arguably it might be generalized to the whole of 'the new French philosophy.' In Rancière, James notes this tension as existing between his insistence on the fundamental heterogeneity of material and sensuous existence, and the revolution of his political thought around terms such as communication, voice, and *logos*, which 'returns or recuperates his thinking back into the more abstract economy of signs, signification and discourse' (126). Albeit in a different register, one might suspect a similar tension between the new French philosophers' attempts to break with the paradigm of language and writing, and the fact that this philosophy nonetheless takes place *in and as* writing. In fact, James gives careful and sympathetic attention to the importance of the performative aspects of the writings of these philosophers, and argues that the attempt to find new modes of writing – what James calls 'the techniques of thought' – is in fact one of their significant traits (16).

In order to ameliorate this tension, it would be necessary to see that it is not in fact writing as such which becomes somehow redundant, but a certain understanding of writing as grounded in structuralist linguistics, and as the untranscendable horizon for thought. Writing instead becomes seen as conditioned by an outside, by the material real, understood as heterogeneous sensation (Rancière), the One (Laruelle), plastic forces of transformation and mutability (Malabou), and so on. As such, writing comes to be seen as itself a material practice, conditioned by the real. Again, however, any claim to genuine novelty here needs to be approached with caution: we might compare the post-structuralist recourse to bodily, libidinal, Nietzschean energetics as the motive force of writing and thinking, beyond the structuralist thesis of the closure of representation within ideal limits. Once again it is likely a matter of degree of emphasis, rather than a question of a truly radical break.

Like all philosophy, *The New French Philosophy* is best not considered as the announcement of a break or caesura, and a new state of play, and worst still as an annotated brochure or buyer's guide to the new intellectual fashions, but appropriated transversally, for themes, arguments, and concepts which might be appropriated and brought into contact with other ideas, other thinkers, throughout the history of thought. Echoing Lyotard's observation quoted at the outset, James recognizes perfectly well that '[t]he question of the new and its advent is far from new' (3). Nevertheless, there always remains the intellectual responsibility of keeping up to date with new thought: many of the arguments of the philosophers presented here are genuine innovations, and deserve to be considered seriously, especially insofar as they mark a welcome renewal of the relation of philosophy to the natural sciences, and reconsiderations of the subject and of political action. While the breaks with poststructuralism can be overstated, there are nevertheless real resources to be found in these new thinkers for moving thought forward. Moreover there is always a genuine excitement which accompanies exposure to new ideas, and one of the most enjoyable things about James's book is that it provides precisely this.

In short, and cutting through all the more nuanced considerations above, *The New French Philosophy* is a concise, readable, accessible, accurate, and insightful introduction to recent thought in the French philosophical tradition. It really has no rival for the kind of book it aims to be and is, and is essential reading for all interested in the contemporary French philosophical scene today. As such, it is the best way to 'gain time' in updating oneself with some of the most recent philosophical ideas, but hopefully more as well, insofar as it may well prompt in the reader actual thinking.

UNIVERSITY OF DUNDEE

NOTE

1. Jean Baudrillard, *Passwords*, trans. Chris Turner (New York: Verso, 2003), 3.