

François Zourabichvili and the Physics of Thought

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This volume presents to the English-speaking world two books by the French philosopher François Zourabichvili (1965–2006): *Deleuze: A Philosophy of the Event* and *The Vocabulary of Deleuze*. These two works were the bookends, as it were, of Zourabichvili's short career, and they are both landmarks in the interpretation of Deleuze's philosophy. *A Philosophy of the Event* was published in 1994, a year before Deleuze's death, and while it was not the first book to be published on Deleuze, it was the first to provide a systematic analysis of Deleuze's work as a whole, and it has remained a touchstone of all subsequent readings of Deleuze. "We assume that philosophy will not emerge from the Deleuzian adventure unscathed," Zourabichvili wrote, "but we know that it is up to us to demonstrate this and to pursue it . . . I have sought above all to extract the logical movements of an oeuvre that seems to me to be one of the most important and most powerful of the twentieth century."¹ *The Vocabulary of Deleuze* appeared nine years later, in 2003, as a volume in the "Vocabulaire de . . ." series directed by Jean-Pierre Zarader—a well-known collection of books that includes similar volumes on Bergson by Frédéric Worms, and on Foucault by Judith Revel. Whereas the first book was oriented around the Deleuzian concept of the event, the second book provided a concise analysis of many of the new concepts Deleuze had created, which are presented in the "dictionary" form that Deleuze himself had utilized in his short books on Nietzsche and Spinoza. "No one has indicated what a 'Vocabulary' should be better than Deleuze," Zourabichvili noted, "not a collection of opinions on general themes, but a series of logical sketches that describe so many complex acts of thought, titled and signed."²

By the time the *Vocabulary* appeared in 2003, Zourabichvili had developed a number of theses about Deleuze's work that went beyond mere exegesis, and which have had a decisive influence on later readings. Two of these theses are worth highlighting here. On the one hand, Zourabichvili strongly criticized interpretations that saw in Deleuze's work the development of a new ontology. "There

is no ‘ontology of Deleuze,’” he starkly claimed, “If there is an orientation of the philosophy of Deleuze, this is it: *the extinction of the term ‘being’ and therefore of ontology.*”³ This assertion is all the more surprising in that Deleuze himself wrote, in *The Logic of Sense*, that “philosophy merges with ontology” (LS 179), and readers content with proof-texting are easily content to cite such phrases as definitive. But Zourabichvili points out that the second part of the Deleuze’s statement—“but ontology merges with the univocity of being” (LS 179)—essentially “perverts” the appeal to ontology, since the thesis of univocity equates the term “Being” with difference, and replaces ontology with a theory of relations (becomings, multiplicities. . .). The introduction of *A Thousand Plateaus* ends with the admonition to “establish a logic of the AND,” and to “overthrow ontology” (ATP 25), and it is this undermining of ontology that Zourabichvili traces out in many of the entries in the *Vocabulary*. Yet this thesis had already been prepared for in the first book. For Zourabichvili, the principal theme of Deleuze’s logic, its “abstract motor,” is the concept of the *event*. “In all my books,” Deleuze said in an interview, “I’ve tried to discover the nature of events; it’s a philosophical concept, the only one capable of ousting the verb ‘to be’ and attributes” (N 141). This leads Zourabichvili to pose a series of pivotal questions: What are the consequences of Deleuze’s elevation of the concept of the event? What problematic regions are thereby invented, and through what original assemblage of concepts? What exactly is a philosophy of the event? Throughout his early book, Zourabichvili attempts to disengage—through its echoes and variations—the logic of one of the most epochal philosophical experiments of the twentieth-century: a non-dialectical logic of becoming, grounded in the articulation of the notions of the outside and the fold, and the emergence of the concepts of multiplicity and singularity.

On the other hand, and perhaps even more importantly, Zourabichvili developed the thesis of the *literality* of Deleuze’s philosophical concepts. There exists a common assumption that Deleuze’s concepts should be understood as metaphors, and Zourabichvili fought strongly against this misconception. The concept of metaphor depends on a distinction between an originary sense and a figural sense, with the latter resting on its resemblance to the former. But Zourabichvili shows that Deleuze’s notion of literality overthrows this distinction between the originary and the figural: the production of sense is itself a matter of *transport* or passage, that is, it implies

a plane in which heterogeneous significations encounter each other, contaminate each other, forming lines or connections with each other (becomings), and thereby forming what Deleuze calls “blocks” that are endowed with their own consistency:

If the line of flight is like a train in motion, it is because one jumps linearly on it, one can finally speak “literally” of anything at all, a blade of grass, a catastrophe or sensation, calmly accepting that which occurs when it is no longer possible for anything to stand for anything else . . . “I am speaking literally” because it is not so much a question of defining something as effectively drawing a line . . . This is neither one nor the other . . . nor is it a resemblance between the two: “I am speaking literally,” I am drawing lines, lines of writing, and life passes between the Lines . . . Not only does one speak literally, one also lives literally, in other words, following lines, whether connectable or not, even heterogeneous ones. (ATP 198, 200–1)

This is why Deleuze always insisted that his concepts must be understood literally, and in this regard, he can be contrasted with Jacques Derrida, who suggested that philosophy could be seen as a kind of “generalized metaphors.”

Zourabichvili developed this theme of literality in a series of remarkable essays that have recently been published in a posthumous collection entitled *Literality and Other Essays on Art*, which in effect constitutes the third volume of Zourabichvili’s trilogy of works on Deleuze.⁴ Yet this book goes much further. Although Zourabichvili was known primarily as a brilliant interpreter of Deleuze and Spinoza, the essays collected here reveal the broad range of Zourabichvili’s interests. The book includes not only three pivotal essays on Deleuze’s concept of literality, but articles on Nietzsche and Chateaubriand, a discussion of revolution, the development of a non-Gadamerian concept of “play” (as an act of inaugurating an always-variable rule), studies of the politics of vision found in various cinematic works (including films by Vertov, Barnet, and Santiago), an investigation into the nature of “interactive” artworks, and several pieces on aspects of Deleuze’s aesthetics. Taken together, the essays define a contemporary aesthetic that reveals the full range of Zourabichvili’s thought—an oeuvre that goes far beyond his readings of Deleuze, and shows the degree to which Zourabichvili, despite the tragic brevity of his career, must be considered to be one of the more significant French philosophers of the contemporary period.

Zourabichvili was born in 1965, and took his own life on April 19, 2006, at age 41. He came from an aristocratic Russian family of Georgian descent, who had been dispersed throughout Europe after the Russian Revolution, and with whom he maintained complexities.⁵ During his university studies, he regularly attended Deleuze's seminars at the University of Paris–Vincennes at St. Denis. He passed his *agrégation* exam in 1989, and taught at various *lycées* from 1988 until 2001, when he took up a position as *maître de conférences* at the University Paul Valéry in Montpellier. From 1998 to 2004, he served as a *directeur de programme* at the Collège international de philosophie in Paris. He received his doctorate in 1999 with a thesis on Spinoza directed by Étienne Balibar and Dominique Lecourt. Though he is better known for his work on Deleuze, Zourabichvili's work on Spinoza was equally extensive and distinguished. In 2002, Zourabichvili published two substantial works on Spinoza: *Spinoza: A Physics of Thought* and *Spinoza's Paradoxical Conservatism: Childhood and Royalty*. The first book argues that, since for Spinoza ideas belong to Nature as much as bodies, only a special physics—in no way metaphorical—can account for the strange universe that they compose, a physics conceived as a science of *transformations* (a non-cognitivist naturalism) whose scope is as much medical as it is logical. This physics of thought led Spinoza to undertake a clinical study of mental pathologies in third and fourth parts of the *Ethics*, which revealed what Zourabichvili calls a *transformist imaginary* that haunts the human spirit and keeps it in a state of powerlessness, and which the *Ethics* aimed to release us from. The second book continues these themes in the two registers indicated by its subtitle. Spinoza provides a new point of view on the growth and education of children around which ethics must be reorganized, while at the same time pursuing a pitiless critique of absolute monarchy in favor of a popular freedom (the “multitude”), revealing an unexpected relation to war outlined in the *Tractatus*. Both analyses point to Spinoza's “paradoxical conservatism,” which is the exact opposite of what is usually meant by the term: whereas ordinary conservatism aims at preserving the existing state of things, Spinoza's paradoxical conservatism instead aims at inventing the conditions for a true conservation of oneself (the neutralization of death and servitude). The result is a “revolutionary” reading of Spinozism that leads to a new concept of conservatism.

Zourabichvili's work on Spinoza thus opens up as many new paths for research as does his work on Deleuze. Indeed, in 2007, a

conference entitled *The Physics of Thought in François Zourabichvili* was organized by the Collège international de philosophie and the École normale supérieure under the direction of Bruno Clement and Frédéric Worms, which brought together an international group of scholars to explore these new directions of thought, and included Pierre Macherey, Pierre-François Moreau, Pierre Zaoui, Paula Marrati, Paul Patton, Paolo Godani, and Marie-France Badie. Zourabichvili's last published article, "Kant with Masoch" (which was meant to be contrasted with Lacan's famous article, "Kant with Sade"), was published in the journal *Multitudes*, and examined the ways in which Deleuze reorganized the relations between art, desire, and the Law. All these works exemplify Zourabichvili's own insistence that the Deleuzian revolution in philosophy is not an already accomplished fact, but must be taken up anew by every reader who is affected by Deleuze's thought.

With this all-too-brief overview of Zourabichvili's career in hand, we can return in more detail to the themes found in *A Philosophy of the Event* and *The Vocabulary of Deleuze*. The method (even a "style" as we will define it further down) Zourabichvili chooses to employ in both volumes he calls an "*exposition of concepts*." In the 2004 introduction to *A Philosophy of the Event*, a work that was actually written ten years earlier when the author admits that Deleuze was not yet openly acknowledged as "a major thinker in the twentieth Century," Zourabichvili urgently addresses a new problematic according to which these volumes should be read. Ten years later, although the claim of Deleuze as a "full-fledged thinker" was now possible, since philosophers and non-philosophers alike were laying claim to something like "a Deleuzian event" in their own respective domains, nevertheless the meaning of this event is in danger of being misapprehended under "the pompous name of Ontology." In other words, what Zourabichvili hears at this moment, even despite the excess of monographs on Deleuze that are beginning to appear, is a strangely muted but nevertheless persistent "refusal of the literal," a refusal that even touches upon the sense of actual statements. For example, as he cautions us to listen [*entendre*], "Deleuze spoke clearly [*en toutes lettres*]—and literally [*à la lettre*]—of his program: substitution of IS (*est*) by means of AND (*et*) or, what amounts to the same thing, substitution of becoming for being."⁶ Consequently, it is in response to this new danger, which he regards as much more pernicious than mere naivety, that Zourabichvili chooses a purely expository mode as his own method of approaching Deleuze's

philosophy, and the genre of a vocabulary or lexicon as “the only guarantee of an *encounter* with a body of thought.”⁷

But in what sense do we speak here of *ex-posing* the literal sense of concepts? Of course, concepts are never exposed as singular facts, but are distributed according to a logic that orders the conditions of intelligibility. As Deleuze himself remarks at several points, the sense of concepts is not only to be found at the level of terms (as in a philosophical understanding), but also on the level of percepts and affects that run underneath the surface of a linguistically or syntactically composed order of statements that claim to define the concept *qua* concept (N 165).⁸ As one of the four modes of discourse, exposition is defined as an art of expressing ideas clearly, and the order of logic is implied in the very syntax of the sentences employed to render the sense of ideas literally, and not as expressions of opinion, as in the case of persuasion or argument. Although it may employ the other modes (argument, narrative, description) as subjacent movements, the distinguishing feature of exposition as a form of presentation is to offer statements as *matters of fact*, that is, to achieve as closely as possible a “literal” sense of the idea. (Thus, the generic appearance of the glossary or lexicon only gives a vague approximation of the literality that is being sought.) Whereas the goal of a dictionary or glossary is the definition of terms as parts that will serve knowledge, which is always constructed afterwards employing terms or concepts in a patchwork of understanding, the goal of the expository mode is *to position* the unfolding of a concept at the very moment of its intelligibility, which necessarily precedes its comprehension as belonging to a system of philosophy, much less to an already recognized proper territory of an author’s work. As Zourabichvili describes this moment, “every concept participates in an act of thinking that displaces the field of intelligibility, modifying the conditions of the problem we pose for ourselves; it thus does not let itself be assigned a place within a common space of comprehension given in advance for pleasant or aggressive debates with its competitors.”⁹

In the above statement, Zourabichvili seems to be implying that, to become the literal expression of a unique sense-event, the concept must first be extracted from a common place (or topic) of discussion that has already pre-comprehended its meaning. The most common manner of understanding this event occurs when we regard, either in the manner in which the concept is defined or in the expression itself, the presence of a novelty that displaces or “shifts” the conditions of a previous order of intelligibility. Thus, in the history of philosophy

the idea of novelty is often employed to represent the cause of this sudden re-distribution on the level of sense. And yet, according to Zourabichvili, the form of “novelty” appears as the greatest danger, because even though it appears to announce a new distribution of a common space or comprehension, more often than not it merely provides a new metaphor, which has occurred often in the history of ontology around the different senses accorded to the word “being.” Of course, the second manner of extracting the concept from a common space of understanding is by means of the negative, and Zourabichvili himself employs this mode in the statement, “there is no ontology in Deleuze,” which in some ways prepares for a new exposition of the sense of the event since it clears away the common space of a previous comprehension. At the same time, with regard to this second strategy, there is also the immediate danger that another term will be erected in the place (empiricism or pragmatism, for example), which obstructs the literal sense of the event announced since these terms are equally pre-comprehended as already existing topics of a common space of comprehension, thereby becoming merely yet another occasion for “aggressive discussions and competitions” (or rivalries between those who claim fidelity to the sense of the event), but which only manage to distribute the concept according to an already established logic of sense.

As is well known, Deleuze himself deplored the image of discussion as an adequate conception of the event that causes concepts to become re-distributed at certain moments in the history of philosophy. According to Deleuze and Guattari’s last work, the fact that discussion (and, therefore, polemic) has become the dominant image of thought is only the expression of a general movement in contemporary philosophy that has replaced the conditions of critique (i.e., *krisis*, judgment) with the logics of marketing and self-promotion. The academic fields that comprise what Zourabichvili sarcastically calls “Deleuzeology” have not been not been immune to these trends either, and here he discerns the presence of two fallacies that have resulted in the dominant appropriations of Deleuze’s philosophy to date. The first error, already addressed above, is the identification of the event of this philosophy as the arrival of a new ontology—“What fun, naive or perfidious, to want by all means to rediscover one in Deleuze!” he says. However, it is the second fallacy that is much more subtle and persistently responsible for instituting across the disciplinary fields that have opened themselves to the event of this philosophy a “congenital form of misrecognition” [*méconnaissance*],

which has occurred under the false alternative of an intrinsic and, therefore, “proper” versus extrinsic and “figurative” *ex-position* of concepts.

In the opening entry of the 2003 *Vocabulary*, “*à la lettre*,” Zourabichvili addresses this second fallacy most explicitly in the following statement:

Perhaps philosophy today suffers too often from a false alternative—either to explain *or* to use—as well as well as a false problem: the impression that a too-precise approach would amount to canonizing a current author. Consequently, we are not surprised to occasionally find philosophical production divided on the one hand into disincarnated exegeses, and on the other into essays which, although ambitious, still seize their concepts *from above*. Assuming it is not merely decorative, the same applies to the artist, the architect, or the sociologist who at a certain moment in their work uses an aspect of Deleuze’s thought, for they too are eventually led to explain it to themselves.¹⁰

In this passage, what Zourabichvili exposes as a false alternative might be better understood today under the twin banners of either a purified and properly philosophical Deleuze (one who often appears without the shadow of Guattari), or of an “applied Deleuzism.” This alternative continues to distribute in advance the conditions for the intelligibility of the event and the promise of this philosophy according to a metaphorical equivalence in the division [*partage*] of proper and figurative appropriations of Deleuze. However, the literal does not belong to this distribution [*partage*] of sense, and would appear outside the strict alternatives offered by intrinsic versus extrinsic, or properly philosophical versus non-philosophical understanding. In fact, “we need both wings to fly,” as Deleuze earlier argued concerning Spinoza, especially given that the sense of concepts does not move only between terms, but also among things and within ourselves (N 165).

In response to this metaphorical economy of “*either one or several Deleuzes*” (“just as there is a Beckett before Pim, during Pim, and after Pim—a quite muddled affair, as it should be”¹¹), Zourabichvili rejects the alternative, and it is precisely around this point that he claims that a literal “exposition of concepts is the only guarantee of an *encounter* with a body of thought”¹² (5).

How is this so? First, following Deleuze, he affirms the *necessity* of an encounter with thought that is effectuated by what might appear, at first, as “strange” and even “irrational.”

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The fact that a concept has no sense or necessity without a corresponding “affect” or “percept” does not prevent there being something else in addition: a condensation of logical movements that the mind must effectuate if it wants to philosophize. Otherwise we remain in the initial fascination of words and phrases that we mistake for the irreducible component of intuitive comprehension.¹³

It is here, moreover, that we might glimpse the manner in which the movement of concepts must be placed into contact with something beyond words and phrases whose sense cannot be foreseen or comprehended beforehand, which first transforms the encounter with thought into a necessary rather than merely a logical association of ideas. Therefore, the ex-position of concepts is first effectuated in the mind through the presence of a “pre-elective affinity,” or as Deleuze calls it, “a non-philosophical comprehension” that cannot be known beforehand. “That the heart beats when reading the text is a necessary prelude, or better still an affinity needed in order to comprehend.” And yet, as Zourabichvili reminds us, this initial encounter is only half of comprehension and still does not guarantee a re-distribution of the previous conditions of intelligibility according to a new logic of sense. “It is true that this part deserves to be insisted upon,” he writes, “since the practice of philosophy in the university excludes it almost methodically, while a dilettantism believing itself to be cultivated confuses it with a *doxa* of the times.”¹⁴ As Deleuze and Guattari also argue, although absolutely necessary, a non-philosophical comprehension is not enough in the same measure that the initial fascination and intoxication with the novelty of thought is not enough to change what it means to think.¹⁵ What is required in addition is another kind of affection; as Zourabichvili writes, “We wouldn’t need Deleuze if we didn’t sense in his oeuvre something that has never been thought, something capable of affecting philosophy in still inestimable ways—which is a result of our *letting ourselves be affected philosophically by it*.”¹⁶ We would propose to call this third form of affection simply a “style.”

Everything we have said up to this point concerning the exposition of concepts really comes down to a question of “style,” as well as to our acknowledgment of Zourabichvili as a great philosophical stylist. Of course, it might seem odd to talk of “style” with regard to these volumes that, on first glance, appear in the form of a glossary or philosophical vocabulary, a genre that one might presume to be a *degree zero* of style. And yet, as Zourabichvili also reminds us, Deleuze himself often employed the form of a lexicon in his earliest works on

Nietzsche and Spinoza, and these belong to what he defined as the “pedagogy of the concept.” Therefore, it is important to underline in our brief introduction to these volumes that the form of the vocabulary is meant neither to be exhaustive nor to encapsulate the totality of the concepts belonging to the Deleuzian corpus. But then, how could it? That is to say, if one of the recognized characteristics of Deleuze’s style of “doing philosophy” is the frenetic, almost schizophrenic, creation of concepts, then the idea of a total glossary could be comparable only to the Borgesian fiction of the total encyclopedia. Zourabichvili himself calls attention to absence of certain concepts from his vocabulary (the cinema concepts, in particular, with the notable exception of the “crystal of time”), and to other concepts that deserve more attention (such as “plane of immanence”), but whose full exposition was aborted to function only as a relay or connective link to other concepts; and, finally, the fact that the arbitrary character of the alphabetical order is the most sure means of not superimposing upon the relations of multiple imbrication between concepts an artificial order of reasons that would divert attention away from the true status of necessity in philosophy. However, to avoid becoming completely partial or arbitrary (or merely subjective) in its assemblage, Zourabichvili defends his method of selection as “sampling” [*échantillonnage*], employing a term that is derived from the philosophy of Leibniz and from Deleuze’s short commentary on Whitman. The modern and technical sense of the term “sampling” belongs neither to the seventeenth-century philosopher, nor the nineteenth-century American poet—unless only figuratively applied—so we might ask what is the literal sense of this term from both sources?

In the *Monadology*, “sampling” can be employed to describe the process by which the monad reads all the totality it includes; nevertheless, this process is described both as method of reading and as an art, and in this case the specific problematic is how to unfold all of the predicates that belong to each monad as its own singular point of view, defined as “a clear zone of expression.” However, for Deleuze, the problem is determined by a movement that does not go from part to whole, “because the totality can be as imperceptible as the parts,” but rather from what is *ordinary* to what is *notable* or *remarkable* (L 87–8). In this sense, the process of “sampling” can actually indicate the precise manner in which conscious perception occurs in the monad, by a means of a selection that begins “as if through a first filter that would be followed by many other filters,” and almost in

the same manner that in the act of exposition a concept is extracted to serve as a sieve of sorts that is first applied to ordinary perceptions (i.e., the previous conditions of intelligibility), “in order to extract from them whatever is remarkable (i.e., clear and distinguished)” (L 91). Likewise, in the brief commentary on Whitman we find that Deleuze employs the *échantillon* (“sample”) as a translation of the term “specimen” (from Whitman’s *Specimen Days*) in reference to what he describes as “the law of the fragment,” and where we find the following maxim: “To select the singular cases and the minor scenes is more important than any consideration of the whole” (CC 57). Here, we have the most succinct and clear expression of the logic that Zourabichvili employs in his own exposition of the concepts he regards as the singular cases and minor points of view. Moreover, as Deleuze writes, “the fragments—as remarkable parts, cases, or views—*must still be extracted by means of a special act, an act that consists, precisely, in writing*” (CC 57; emphasis added). Again we return to the earlier observation that in the art of exposition, by means of the special act that is writing, the concept must first be extracted from a prior assemblage that previously determined the conditions of intelligibility, much in the same manner that using citation words are extracted from their original sentences in order to be placed into new sentences and new possible arrangements—not only, as we have seen, with other concepts in a philosophical understanding, but primarily in relation to a movement that tends toward an outside that is composed by new percepts and affects. Accordingly, we must neither presuppose that concepts already belong to an organic totality that would determine their relations, nor presuppose that in their raw state the concepts have no preliminary artificial order of reasons that would divert our attention away from the act of assembling them according to an order that becomes necessary, and not in the least bit arbitrary, because it expresses a unique point of view. Therefore, following the preliminary entry in the original French edition, the concept of “assemblage” [*agencement*] is the first concept Zourabichvili selects in the *Vocabulary*, where we find the following description: “In reality, the disparity of the cases of the assemblage can be ordered only from the point of view of immanence—hence existence reveals itself to be inseparable from the variable and modifiable assemblages that ceaselessly produce it.”¹⁷

We would like to thank Kieran Aarons, not only for his superb translation, but for his tireless efforts to see this book through to its

publication. Paul Patton's assistance was crucial in first communicating with the French publishers concerning our proposal to combine the original works into one combined volume. Carol MacDonald at Edinburgh University Press has been a model editor, full of patience and critical acumen. Finally, we would like to thank Anne Nancy for her support and friendship throughout this project. This book is dedicated to Anne and her sons, Félix and Timothée.

Notes

1. See below p. 135.
2. From the back cover of the French edition of the *Vocabulary*.
3. See below p. 37.
4. François Zourabichvili, *La littéralité et autres essais sur l'art* (Paris: PUF, 2011). The book includes three essays in particular that are devoted to the theme of literality: "Event and Literality," "The Question of Literality," and "Are Philosophical Concepts Metaphors? Deleuze and his Problematic of Literality."
5. François was the son of the composer Nicolas Zourabichvili, the cousin of the writer Emmanuel Carrère (author, most notably of *Un roman russe*, Paris: POL, 2007) and the nephew of Hélène Carrère d'Encausse, a French historian who specialized in Russia and was elected to the Academie française in 1990. His father's cousin was Salomé Zourabichvili, a French diplomat who served, among other positions, as the French ambassador to Georgia in 2003. His great-great grandfather, Ivane Zourabichvili, had been a minister in the Georgian government from 1920–21.
6. See below p. 37.
7. See below p. 26.
8. As Deleuze and Guattari argue, "a concept is not a set of associated ideas like an opinion [since] ideas can only be associated as images and only ordered as abstractions; to arrive at a concept we must go beyond both of these and arrive as quickly as possible at mental objects determinable as real beings" (WP 207).
9. See below p. 141.
10. See below p. 140.
11. See below p. 35.
12. See below p. 56.
13. See below p. 49.
14. See below p. 141.
15. Of course, Deleuze himself recognized this temptation with respect to one other philosopher, Spinoza, who constitutes perhaps a precedent for understanding the same problem in the reception of his own

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philosophy. It is true, Deleuze observes, that often writers and artists “understand” Spinoza in the sense of incorporating his plan(e) of immanence into their own creative composition without necessarily understanding his philosophical concepts; whereas, most philosophers have left his system in a state of abstraction. In other words, Spinoza unites philosophy and non-philosophy in one and the same sense, which is why Deleuze and Guattari later on refer to him as the “Christ of philosophers.”

16. See below p. 141.

17. See below p. 145.