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First Names and the Problem of “Man” in Laruelle

I present here some thoughts on the problem of the term “man” in the discourse of “first names” immanent to Laruelle’s non-philosophy. I wish to thank Rocco Gangle. It was through conversation with him that I could see better what “first names” might mean. I also wish to thank Katerina Kolozova for her book, Cut of the Real, which has been, shall we say, decisive for me.

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Without Philosophy

Laruelle’s entire corpus, the sum total of texts and interventions that goes under the names “non-philosophy” or “non-standard philosophy” maybe summed up as an effort to venerate the *concept without philosophy*. Non-philosophy, as we know, is not a negation of philosophy. To negate philosophy would merely reify philosophy once again (if only in the negative). Non-philosophy seeks a line of flight beyond the economy of being for or against philosophy. It is a practice of de-reifying philosophy in the name of what philosophy desires to dominate. It speaks for what philosophy silences in its narcissistic drive to have the last word be it on being, history,

politics, humanity, God, and so on. Standard philosophy treats its subjects as “raw material” that it then shapes into philosophical or theoretical “knowledge.” Non-philosophy by contrast treats philosophy itself (its theses and traditions) as de-reified “raw material” and seeks to release them from the claims of tradition and from their imprisoning conceptual architectonics. Of course, this is not without precedent. As I have argued elsewhere non-philosophy shares a contested affinity with certain deconstructive standpoints, but it is not quite “purely” deconstructive.¹ Non-philosophy is also a constructive project: it has axioms, positions, and it advances a kind of doctrine if not a dogma. We may schematically sum these up:

1. The Real is One, but this One cannot be determined or decided by philosophical reason (Philosophical Decision) for it is immanent and it immanently conditions thought itself. Thought is an “effect” of the immanence of the Real, but this “effect” is only a displaced name for the oneness of the Real which is prior to the very concept of causality.
2. The identity of “standard philosophy” is determined by the gesture of Philosophical Decision – the operation by which it decides on the Real. This decision projects a World that it claims merely to reflect.
3. Non-philosophy is against Philosophical Decision and thus against every World standard philosophy projects.

One

Arguably, the most elusive of Laruelle’s concepts is the “One.” By this “first name,” Laruelle designates the condition of the Real. But this oneness should not be confused with ontologies of

oneness. Laruelle's One is not "unitary." The Real as One is prior to the very conditions that would enable a distinction between unitary homogeneity and radically differentiated multiplicities. In *A Biography of Ordinary Man*, Laruelle explains that One names a radically immanent concept of "indivision." Laruelle writes:

[T]he One is not ... yet another transcendence in relation to the transcendence of Being. It includes in itself no philosophical operation or decision. ... Indivision is not experienced or won against division, nor is it merely identified with division without mediation – as in Difference – or through mediation – as in the Dialectical Contradiction. It absolutely a priori precedes division because it is given (to) itself and as itself. ... This identity is indivision itself, which remains immanent (to) itself and does not exit itself – it is irreducibly "finite" or condemned (to) itself.²

Katerina Kolozova lucidly and critically demonstrates the difference between Laruelle's conception of the Real as foreclosed and its status as foreclosed in poststructuralist philosophy. The poststructural conception of the real or "the Real" (as in Lacan's discourse) is seen as impossibly foreclosed in itself. All we have access to, so the argument goes, is discursive systems that always fail to think the Real in the last instance. Poststructural (or postmodern) theory, writes Kolozova, "consists in the premise that thought can only 'think itself,' that the real is inaccessible to knowledge ... and that there is *nothing but* discursive constructs that fully determine thinking."³ Laruelle's only argument with this aspect of poststructuralist orthodoxy is that is only half right. For if the Real is truly foreclosed to thinking, then it must also be foreclosed to the very thinkability of its complete foreclosure.

Laruelle's work asks us to think the foreclosure of the Real as a form of foreclosure that cannot be thought from within the digitalism or the dialectic of the thinkable and the unthinkable.⁴ The Real is of an order which always already renders the opposition of thinkable and the unthinkable unworkable. "The Real," writes Kolozova, "is not an abstraction, an idea that stands independently, an 'out there' in itself. It is not a substance, but a 'status,' as Laruelle would call it."⁵ The status of the Laruellean Real is of an order that always already includes and immanently transcends the aporetic limits enunciated by standard poststructural discourse on the Real. The Real, for Laruelle, cannot be addressed not because it is "beyond" us, but because it is the conditions for which all thought is a possible result. It is not "beyond" but radically prior to us. Non-philosophy radically de-transcendentalizes and de-reifies poststructural philosophy's dogma that the Real is unspeakable or beyond signification. Kolozova writes:

The goal of non-philosophy is to rid philosophy of its dictatorship of the transcendental vis-à-vis the real, which again only leads to its narcissistic self-sufficiency. The first gesture toward this goal is the unilateral positioning of thought vis-à-vis the instance of the real. ... Thought correlates with the real as the authority in the last instance rather than with a system of thought. In this way it operates with concepts that have been radicalized and that are then used non-philosophically.⁶

Non-philosophy "correlates with the real" (or the Real) but in a way that I have elsewhere described as a "relation of non-relationality."⁷ The Real is relationality prior to relations of relative positions. The Real is without prepositional coordinates: there is no "to," "of," "from," etc that correlates (with) the Real. There is only the Real as such as a unilateral surface. But like

a Mobius strip, the Real's topology can be complex even while it is ultimately *uni-lateral* or *one-sided*. The Real is truly transcendental for Laruelle, but its transcendental is of the order of immanence itself voided of any concept or *philosophy of immanence*. Laruelle writes:

The “transcendental” instance par excellence is not Being but absolute immanence, indivision insofar as its own “object” in a strictly immanent or “unreflective” (rather than “internal”) experience. Prior to any other definition, “transcendental” means a radical immanence, devoid of distance to itself or of nothingness.⁸

How is it that the One is truly transcendental by reason of its radical immanence and yet this can still take a name by way of the “One” as in an apophatic voicing of the Real? What conditions (or justifies) Laruelle's non-philosophy of the One? How can the One be even minimally experienced so that it can become an object of even non-philosophical reflection? On this score, we have to think through Laruelle's continuing fidelity to a certain phenomenological stance. Theorem 20 in *A Biography of Ordinary Man* reads: “*The One and the experience of the One are identical: this is its transcendent truth.*”⁹ He continues:

The One is not given before its experience, before experience in general. The essence of the One is its “reality” in the sense of its purely transcendental experience, insofar as the essence of the One – and in spite of the so-called “transcendental” tradition, although for the same reasons – is the essence of the *veritas transcendentalism* that was lost as soon as the autonomous or unitary philosophical decision came into being.¹⁰

Everything here hangs on the phrase “experience in general” for it is at this level of “ordinary” or “generic” experience that the Real as One is experienced without (philosophical) reflection. It is precisely at the level of unreflective, dumb experience that the “individual” experiences the Real (of which the individual is always already apart). This is close to Heidegger’s repeated refrain that we are “beings in the world,” but it stops short of Heidegger’s fully philosophized concept of “Dasein” as that “being concerned with Being.” To be concerned with Being is to be concerned with philosophies of Being and that is to already submit the experience of “being thrown” into the “world” to the regime of philosophies of lifeworld, being, and existence. The moment the Real is submitted to the imperial authority of philosophy it ceases to exist as an immanent experience and becomes a second-order reflection/projection of whatever conceptual apparatus one is working with. Laruelle writes:

As unreflective transcendental experience, the One is that which “grounds” unilaterality and ir-reversibility, that which removes from them their relative character and gives them their reality. Experienced this way, this One is the essence of the individual. We call this essence “unary.”¹¹

The entire tropology of non-philosophy – its “first names” such as Real, One, Human, Man and so forth – are structurally invariant signs insofar as they are equally insufficient to decide that which they name. The Real, the Human, the One, and so on always exceed the conceptual grasp delimited by the bounds inscribed by their proper names. But this excess is *unilateral* – an immanent excess. These names do not mark thresholds beyond which the Real as One lies. Rather, these names are in the Real, included immanently within it. And these names are there among all the other insufficient names of philosophical language.

Real, Man, One: why begin with these names? Why does Laruelle adopt these as his “first names?” It is not because he thinks these are ontologically foundational, but rather he chooses these names to be first among others. Why? Because they name what we immanently experience in the practical exercise of life. We may philosophically wonder what is reality or what it means to be human. But we also live out the knowledge of reality when we jump out of the way of a moving car. We move because we intuitively know that the danger posed by the car is real and not a fantasy. And *practically speaking*, we have some insight into what it means to be human simply through the practice of living itself. Thus, when Laruelle speaks of the human in “generic” terms or of “generic man” this should not be taken to mean a concept of the human subtracted from every form of specificity and concreteness. Human or Man does not name some abstract universal or foundational concept of humanness. Rather, it is the human in all its multiform dimensions that Laruelle takes as the generic condition. It is human complexity and human variance itself that is generic.

But still, the question returns to me: why these “first names”? Because they are there in the inherited languages and practices that organize the practice of life. To object to the term “human” in the name of posthumanism or to “man” in the name of feminism is right and good, but this objection is in principle included in Laruelle’s “first names.” These names are used because they are *manifestly insufficient*. They nakedly exhibit their non-totality. These names are clumsy tools more than vaunted names in an order of discourse. They are the ordinary, defetishized names of generic experience.

But still, again, Laruelle could have chosen other names first and his decision not to do so is a decision of some kind – philosophical or not. That decision must be thought and where

possible submitted to scrutiny else we run the risk of reifying his choices, Laruelle's "first names," which would do violence to the ethics of non-philosophy and to what is excluded by his first names in one stroke.

Real/Man

Laruelle identifies ordinariness with the "mystical;" for him what is most ordinary and generic is terribly hard to think from a philosophical perspective. Philosophy cannot speak of the human in general; its "human" is that of ontological reflection/projection, politics, society, class, race, gender, etc. Laruelle argues that philosophy is already full of phantasms produced through abstract thought including philosophical accounts of lived and situated experience. The situated and the abstract perspective on the human, for Laruelle, both do violence to the human by destroying its actuality in the name of conceptuality. We have to think the human as including both and neither a universal subtracted from every particular and the human as always already discursively situated. We have to think the insufficiency of each language game to the actuality of the human. But precisely because Laruelle starts from the presupposition that all conceptual language is insufficient to name (or finally know) the human, this means that he is, in his mind, free to choose where to begin, to choose which names to take as first. (For this insight, I am particularly grateful to Rocco Gangle.)

Ordinariness

The term "Man" occupies a structurally analogous position to that of the "Real" in non-philosophy. They are both "first names" in Laruelle's discourse. But more than that, "Man" and the "Real" are construed as beyond decision inasmuch as neither can ever simply occupy the

position of “object” in a philosophical reflection or projection. The Real is what is decisive for the very act of decision itself; it is its always already *a-priori* condition. Likewise, “Man” is that always already decisive matrix of identification and disidentification according to which the human has been (and failed to become) thinkable. “Real” and “Man” are the inadequate and displaced names of what is in concrete reality the conditioning horizon of thought: the cogitating animal immersed in what we call “reality.” It matters crucially then what models, figures, and forms of figuration, we use to mark these conditions. And it is no innocent matter that Laruelle insists on “Man” as a figure through which to think the human in non-standard ways. For what is non-standard about the figure of “man”? Of course, the way that Laruelle deploys this figure is non-standard, but the term itself is certainly an old standard. But herein lies, arguably, a productive (if paradoxical) “force of thought.”

The nakedness of the term “man” –its fact of being so starkly there in language – gives it its force of thought. Man’s very ubiquity in discourse makes its selection by Laruelle all the more jarring. I find myself asking: really? Are you really going to insist on using that term? But it is precisely because it is bound up in the politics and poetics of the human and its cognates from “humanism” to “anti-humanism” and “post-humanism” that its election (or selection) by Laruelle functions as a lightning rod of sorts; it attracts and illuminates the stakes of defining the human or perhaps I should say of “de-defining” the human. For that is what is at stake in Laruelle; it is not that he “deconstructs” the human (Derrida) or historicizes the human (Foucault), but rather he de-defines the human (qua Man) by subtracting the human from the violating and victimizing language that has enchained this figure to the decisionist calculus of humanist, anti-humanist, and posthumanist philosophies. In *Dictionary of Non-Philosophy* under the heading “Man

(Humans”) we read: “Philosophy wants the inhuman, the pre-human, the all-too-human and the over-human without recognizing the ‘ordinary’ nothing-but-human.”¹²

Ethics of Translation

I want to conclude this somewhat rambling set of somewhat disconnected thoughts with a call to think the politics of translation. How “best” should we translate Laruelle’s figure of the human given that he gives us options? Here we encounter something of the ethical “task of the translator” to cite Walter Benjamin in passing. Perhaps we should not be, or perhaps I should not be, so invested in Laruelle’s first names. Perhaps Kolozova’s practice of lowercasing those “first names” best honors non-philosophy’s spirit for it de-reifies Laruelle’s “first names” and makes of them “raw material” for a thinking otherwise. Perhaps what we need then is (and maybe this is already immanent in Laruelle’s work) is to think “man” otherwise by seeing this figure through the prism of the dying, the dead, the tortured, those “undocumented” and un-grieved deaths; not the man as the “measure of all,” but as all that has been forgotten and erased by the edifice of humanism and its cognates.

¹ See Jonathan Fardy, *Laruelle and Non-Photography* (London: Palgrave Pivot, 2018).

² François Laruelle, *A Biography of Ordinary Man: On Authorities and Minorities*, trans. Jessie Hock and Alex Dubilet (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018), 59.

³ Katerina Kolozova, *Cut of the Real: Subjectivity in Poststructuralist Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 2.

⁴ See Alexander R. Galloway, *Laruelle: Against the Digital* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

⁵ Kolozova, *Cut of the Real*, 2.

⁶ Kolozova, *Cut of the Real*, 3.

⁷ See, Jonathan Fardy, *Laruelle and Art: The Aesthetics of Non-Philosophy* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019).

⁸ Laruelle, *A Biography of Ordinary Man*, 60.

⁹ Laruelle, *A Biography of Ordinary Man*, 59.

¹⁰ Laruelle, *A Biography of Ordinary Man*, 59-60.

¹¹ Laruelle, *A Biography of Ordinary Man*, 65-66.

¹² François Laruelle and Collaborators, *Dictionary of Non-Philosophy*, trans. Taylor Adkins (Minneapolis: Univocal Publishing, 2013), 78.