Gilles Deleuze, 1925–1995

One of the saints

Deleuze was a singular combination of philosophical and scientific culture, aesthetic inspiration and enormous generosity of spirit. If, as he and Guattari suggested, Spinoza was the Christ of philosophers, then Deleuze was surely one of the saints. Nietzsche suggests that what distinguished the saints was their extraordinary strength of will and capacity to overcome their former selves. Deleuze exhibited these qualities in his work and in his life, to the very end. He was a philosopher trained in the old school, a specialist in the history of philosophy who was profoundly affected by the extra-philosophical movements of thought and social activism that exploded in France during the years around 1968.

Anti-Oedipus was written for the particular agglomeration of urban tribes whose aspirations did not accord with the values implicit in the Freudian and Marxian orthodoxy of the French Left. A Thousand Plateaus took this process of thinking in relation to a particular outside and raised it to the nth power. In Deleuze’s own view, this was the best book he wrote, alone or with Guattari. The concepts invented here are remarkable not only for their political resonance but also for the manner in which they advance a unique conception and practice of philosophy. In his pursuit of this project, Deleuze became an increasingly paradoxical figure: a philosopher who defended the autonomy of philosophical thought in relation to art and science but denied any hierarchy between them; a proponent of nomad thought who believed in philosophy as a system; a Nietzschean political thinker who never ceased becoming Marxist.

Deleuze taught us that critique must be active if it is to be effective. True critique is the by-product of the creation of new concepts and the affirmation of a form of life. His vitalism resisted the separation of conceptual and sensual life and sustained a conception of thought as the invention of new values. Nietzsche and Philosophy no less than Anti-Oedipus and A Thousand Plateaus embodies a form of critical thought which is undertaken from the perspective of a particular form of life. Such critique is necessarily partial and incomplete. It abjures the universal (view from) nowhere which philosophy traditionally claims to occupy. It also embodies a form of thought which resists the separation of philosophical fact and value: the concepts of schizoanalysis, pragmatics or nomadology express movements of individual and social differentiation. Becoming-minor, absolute deterritorialization and the plane of immanence are concepts which serve an ethos of permanent becoming-revolutionary.

Deleuze was credited from his earliest years with a capacity to seize upon a particular philosophy and turn it inside out: Malebranche as seen from the perspective of Adam’s rib according to Tournier’s vital anecdote. His earliest work comprised a series of studies of other philosophers, of which it is often said they express Deleuze as much as they do Bergson, Nietzsche, Spinoza or Kant. This was not simply a playful strategy of infiltrating the thought of others, but a means to the creation of new concepts. Later, reflecting upon his own manner of escape from the repressive historical institution of the history of philosophy, he detailed the perverse procedure by which he fabricated monstrous versions of Bergson, Nietzsche, Spinoza or Kant:
the crucial rule was to say nothing that the author in question had not in fact said, but
to do so in a manner which produced unrecognizable facsimiles. Deleuze was a
pioneer of the deconstructive technique of reading philosophical texts against
themselves. He employed it to produce among others a systematic Nietzsche, an anti-
Platonist Plato and Kantian foundations for a transcendental empiricism.

In his hands, however, this technique was always employed to produce new
concepts. Deleuzian concepts have an affective as well as a perceptive dimension,
which is why they are dramatized and always appear in costume. Even the most
technical philosophical works are famous for their examples, such as the displacement
of body parts in the tortoise embryo or the transcendental figure of stupidity in
Difference and Repetition. In this book and The Logic of Sense, Deleuze worked out,
in explicit engagement with the philosophical tradition, the requirements of a form of
thought defined by its absence of ground or limits and its relation to the outside: a
concept of pure difference, a concept of multiplicity and a non-dogmatic image of
thought along with an account of language, events and the creation of meaning. A
Thousand Plateaus exemplifies the resultant heterogenetic conceptual system. The
successive plateaus each develop their own assemblage of concepts in relation to
particular concrete contents. There is continuity across the different plateaus, but this
takes the form of continuous conceptual variation. The architecture of this book obeys
a logic of multiplicities in which the same concepts recur, but always in different
relations to other concepts such that their nature in turn is transformed: repetition and
difference.

Deleuze’s conception of thought does not refuse all system but rather seeks to
create a system of an entirely novel kind: heterogenetic in the sense that it is capable
of endless continuation where this implies endless variation; outside-thought, une
pensée du dehors, in the sense that it only functions in connection with forces and
materials outside the system. With Deleuze, a unique and powerful philosophical
voice is created in external relation to other voices and to forces and movements apart
from the apparent speaking subject. In an interview, he once said that Foucault taught
us the indignity of speaking for others. Of Deleuze himself, it might be said that he
taught us the indignity of claiming to speak for ourselves. It is only by becoming-other
that we finally become who we really are.

Paul Patton

An anti-Oedipal tribute

The author of Anti-Oedipus leaves his readers in the place of knotted subjects:
grief alternates with gratitude, and yet we must avoid the very Oedipal
position of philosophical orphans. Will his scattered heirs manage to combine
the urge to mourn his loss with the imperative to respect the conceptual attack Deleuze
launched against the paternal (phallic) metaphor and the ideals of order (at both the
macro- and micro-levels) it conveys? As a feminist Deleuzian – that is to say, as an
anti-Oedipal and therefore undutiful daughter – I think that the loyalty that is due to a
philosopher of his calibre must not be translated back into the terms of a masculine
theoretical genealogy – albeit a radical one – which he spent his life refiguring. Today
I want to pay homage to this – the subversive – aspect of Deleuze’s thought, much as I
would like to celebrate his modesty, the frugal simplicity of his lifestyle that was so
removed from the glamour and the mondanités of Parisian philosophers. It is well
known that, in contrast to the necrophilic style of the nouveaux philosophes, Deleuze
never bothered to cry over the death of philosophy, but the reason for this was the
opposite of blind faith in tradition. It is rather that Deleuze was committed to thinking through the radical immanence of the subject after the decline of meta-physics and of its phallogocentric premisses. Let me suggest, therefore, that the appropriate way of mourning Deleuze may be the joyful affirmation of positive and multiple differences – even and especially among his followers – and of loving irreverance – even towards his own thought – as a form of empowerment of new ideas.

I still find it hard to believe how much Deleuze did love philosophy. Having settled into a state of structural ambiguity towards this discipline, I have a lot to learn from the dedication Deleuze displayed towards the activity of creative thinking. Deleuze’s work is marked by the positivity of thinking as a process of becoming, which transcends the boundaries of critical thought and projects us forcefully through to more adequate forms of representation of subjectivity. With respect to such theoretical creativity, I think Deleuze’s philosophy is one of the few that manage to emerge from the ruins of metaphysics with a strong counter-proposal. Even more than his frère-enemi Michel Foucault, Deleuze has marked contemporary philosophy through his radical redefinition of the human subject, in terms that are never just socio-political or aesthetic, but that rather seek interconnections between them.

Deleuze signifies, for me, the full deployment of the philosophy of multiple becomings, which is much more than the critique of the metaphysical foundations of identity: it is also a vote of confidence in philosophy’s capacity for self-renewal. An essential element of the vitality of philosophical discourse is the wilful shedding of disciplinary grandeur, in favour of dialogical exchanges with other disciplines – especially physics and mathematics – but also with contemporary discursive fields, such as cinema, modern art and technological culture. Philosophy thus renews itself by becoming an enlarged notion: it is the activity that consists in reinventing the very image of thinking human subjectivity, so as to empower the active, positive forces of thought and disengage the reactive or negative passions.

Throughout the many phases that characterize his work, Deleuze never ceased to emphasize the empowering force of affirmative passions. In his quarrel with the canonized version of the history of philosophy (dominated by the holy trinity of Hegel, Husserl and Heidegger), he emphasized instead a counter-genealogy of materially enfleshed philosophy (the empiricists, Spinoza, Leibnitz and Nietzsche), which I continue to find breathtaking, in the extreme intelligence of its simplicity.

Like many travel companions on the nomadic journey through Deleuze’s philosophy, I regret that his fame is linked, at least for English speakers, to L’Anti-Oedipe and to his alliance with the ‘schizo-analyste’ Felix Guattari and the anti-psychiatry movement. This is not because I underestimate the importance of their quarrel with the dogmatism and the political conservatism of Jacques Lacan’s
revisitation of Freudian psychoanalysis. On the contrary, I find this phase very relevant in that it highlights Deleuze’s notion of the positivity of desire, which he opposes to the Hegelian legacy in the Lacanian dialectics of lack. I do think, however, that this particular segment of Deleuze’s work should be read as a set of discontinuous variations on his philosophy of radical immanence and positivity. One should not isolate, for instance, the figuration of the desiring machines from this general framework.

In speaking of positive forces or passions, Deleuze accomplishes a double aim: on the one hand he revalorizes affectivity in his theory of the subject; and on the other he gives ample space to the body and the specific temporality of the embodied – or rather the enfleshed – human. In so doing, he redefines the body in a non-essentialistic manner, deconstructing not only the humanistic myth of an authentic human nature but also the way in which psychoanalysis ‘sacralized’ the sexual body. Deleuze wants to replace both these views with the high-tech brand of embodied vitalism which was to engender the ‘intensive’ style of writing that became his trademark. The result is the quest for alternative figurations of human subjectivity and of its political and aesthetic potential. Rhizomes, bodies without organs, nomads, becoming-woman, flows, intensities and multiple becomings are part of this rainbow of alternative figurations Deleuze threw our way.

Deleuze confronted the question of the feminine or the becoming-woman of philosophy with integrity, inscribing it at the very heart of his conceptual thought. Nonetheless, there is an unresolved knot in Deleuze’s relation to the feminine. It has to do with a double pull that Deleuze never solved, between, on the one hand, empowering a generalized ‘becoming-woman’ as the prerequisite for all other becomings and, on the other hand, emphasizing the generative powers of complex and multiple states of transition between the metaphysical anchoring points that are the masculine and feminine. I will express it as a question: What is the relation between feminist theories of sexual difference and Deleuze’s philosophy of difference?

Deleuze’s work displays, on the one hand, a great empathy with the feminist assumption that sexual difference is the primary axis of differentiation and therefore must be given priority, if we are to redefine the transcendental plane of the subject. On the other hand, there is also a tendency, prompted by Guattari, to dilute metaphysical difference into a multiple and undifferentiated becoming. Questioned and probed by women philosophers, not unlike Freud, Deleuze deferred to the superior knowledge of women on this matter.

I do think, however, that, even unresolved, the notion of the ‘becoming-woman’ of philosophy functions as one of the propellers of Deleuze’s philosophy. Conveyed by figurations such as the non-Oedipal little girl, or the more affirmative Ariadne, the feminine face of philosophy is one of the sources for that transmutation of values away from reactivity and into positivity, which allows Deleuze to overcome the boundary that separates mere critique from active empowerment.

Last but not least, Deleuze’s emphasis on the ‘becoming woman’ marks a new kind of philosophical sensibility which has learned how to undo the strait-jacket of phallocentrism to open up towards otherness. In Deleuze’s thought, ‘the other’ is not the emblematic mark of alterity, as in classical philosophy; nor is it a fetishized and necessary other, as in deconstruction. The other for Deleuze is rather a moving horizon of perpetual becoming, towards which the split and nomadic subject of postmodernity moves. I would like to remember Deleuze as ‘le philosophe aux semelles de vent’ (the philosopher with shoe soles made of wind), flying across the desolate space–time continuum of our era, searching for that window that would open out to the other side of gloom and nihilism. Un jour notre siècle sera deleuzien.

Rosi Braidotti
I n June 1971, the novelist and journalist Claude Mauriac met two philosophers: one young, tanned and with a shaven head; the other with 'long grey hair and a worn, tired face'. Foucault and Deleuze were organizing a 'commission of inquiry' into the case of a journalist who had been badly beaten by the police. Although they obviously admired one another's work – Foucault famously expressed the hope that, one day, the century would be Deleuzian – it was really the micro-politics of a turbulent period that brought them together as philosophers militant. Together they participated in what seemed to be endless demonstrations against racism, police brutality, demonstrations in favour of the rights of prisoners, of the right to publish a Great Encyclopedia of Homosexualities... Despite his chronic respiratory problems, Deleuze was never afraid of the tear gas that might have killed him. Micro-politics also drove the philosophers militant apart, as Deleuze veered much closer than Foucault to support for various 'autonomists' and even the Red Army Faction.

In Félix Guattari, the radical psychoanalyst and militant in innumerable causes, Deleuze found an alter-ego. They met in 1969, and Deleuze describes how, over the next three years, they merged 'like two streams' to become the third 'one' who wrote the Anti-Oedipe, followed by a major study of Kafka and then Mille Plateaux (1980). Together they presided like a bicephalous savant, as a colleague put it, over the Centre d' Etudes de Recherche et de Formation Institutionelle, a hive in the boulevard Beaumarchais that brought together an extraordinary collection of philosophers, psychiatrists and town planners to study the working of power in an urban environment.

For Deleuze, philosophy was always a matter of inventing the concepts that were necessary in a given time and place, concepts that were alive with critical force, with politics and freedom. Critical concepts were the one thing that could resist and subvert the cogito of commodities: the act of selling. Deleuze never believed in the death of philosophy and never claimed that metaphysics had been transcended. The conceptual exuberance of many of the books written with Guattari – in which desiring machines rumble in the factory of the unconscious and in which new concepts sprout like some strange vegetable matter – makes it easy to forget just how classical a philosopher Deleuze was. The iconoclast was also the most loving of philosophical curators, and the author of classic studies of Bergson, Kant, Spinoza and Leibniz. It is also easy to forget that Guattari’s contributions were not the product of conceptual brilliance alone; they were grounded in his years of work with schizophrenics at the Clinique de la Borde. Typically, he died there, at home with his patients. Multiplicity in movement was Deleuze’s element. He sometimes seemed to be a multiple organism that constantly put out new shoots, just like the rhizomes he and Guattari described. Gilles Deleuze: mille Deleuze.

The friendship with Foucault was strained by politics, but cemented anew by death. It was Deleuze who read from the History of Sexuality as Foucault’s body was removed from the Paris hospital where he died: 'What is philosophy today ... if not the critical work of thought upon thought...’ The unbroken friendship with Guattari lasted until the latter’s death in 1992. The many tributes published in the French press when Deleuze took his own life in November 1995 all speak of a man with a rare gift for friendship, surely the oldest philosophical value of all. French philosophy has lost a friend. In his Logique du sens, Deleuze described the suicide of Empedocles as a philosophical anecdote. Perhaps he saw his own suicide – the final refusal of more physical suffering – in the same light.

David Macey