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*Messianity and Weakness:
A Review Essay of Laruelle's Christo-Fiction*

François Laruelle, *Christo-Fiction: The Ruins of Athens and Jerusalem*, Columbia University Press, 2015, 296 pp., \$34.95 US (hbk), ISBN 9780231167246.

*How is an ultimatum possible that is, in a certain sense,
weak—a non-victorious force?*

— François Laruelle, *Anti-Badion*¹

How are we to think the Messiah in its very *genericity*? And what law is proper to the generic? Or is the generic itself a kind of law? These are some of the questions posed to us by François Laruelle's *Christo-Fiction*, a major work by an important and challenging thinker. In *Christo-Fiction*, Laruelle's engagement with the question of the messianic—or what he calls “messianity”—reaches its full formulation.² Accordingly, the publication of this work marks not just a significant internal development of his project of “nonphilosophy” (or “nonstandard philosophy”), but also a profound contribution to a messianic and Christological thought divorced from the strictures of orthodox theology. A contribution, then, to a “nonstandard theology.” This is a theology, Laruelle tells us, made insufficient, generic, immanent: “commensurate with ‘ordinary’ or ‘generic’ man” (x). For Laruelle, that is, if we are to unearth the radical potential of theological materials, then we must attend to the “depths of messianity which forms humans.”³ Accordingly, *Christo-Fiction* offers us neither a political theology nor a secularized eschatology; it is, instead, a call to think the messianic anew. Here, “the messianity that is declared in the sayings of Christ is established on the ruins of theological sufficiency” (177). *Christo-Fiction* traces this movement from ruins to depth—to the “greatest depth of the ‘without-return’ or of the Resurrection of Christ” (172, emphasis in original).

¹ François Laruelle, *Anti-Badion*, trans. Robin Mackay (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), xv-xvi.

² Messianism is a central Laruellean motif. The project of nonphilosophy is, Laruelle suggests, a kind of “programmatic messianism” (Laruelle cited in Robin Mackay, “Introduction: Laruelle Undivided,” in *From Decision to Heresy: Experiments in Non-Standard Thought*, ed. Robin Mackay [Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2012], 31).

³ François Laruelle, *Struggle and Utopia at the End Times of Philosophy*, trans. Drew S. Burk and Anthony Paul Smith (Minneapolis: Univocal, 2012), 230.

For Laruelle, nonphilosophy is made up of “waves”—Philosophies I through V—spanning from the early 1970s to the present day. (Nonphilosophy, Laruelle insists, is not an architectonic system, but rather “a series of oceanic swells.”⁴) In *Christo-Fiction*, he develops his earlier work on religion (*Future Christ* and *Mystique non-philosophique à l’usage des contemporains*), ethical theory (*Éthique de l’Étranger. Du crime contre l’humanité* and *General Theory of Victims*), and quantum physics (*Philosophie non-standard. Générique, quantique, philo-fiction* and *Anti-Badiou*), in order to arrive here at a rigorous “science-in-Christ.⁵ Significantly, then, *Christo-Fiction* isolates and develops a number of key conceptual terms within the Laruellean oeuvre: messianity, the generic, depotentialization, and the law. (If Laruelle is a thinker of the messianic, then he is also a thinker of the law—that is, the messianic and the law are almost always interarticulated.) And it brings together Laruelle’s longstanding interest in science and mathematics—specifically quantum theory and algebra—with his ethical and messianic theory. “Laruelle’s theory of science,” as Anthony Paul Smith notes, “is intractable from his theory of the messiah.”⁶ The scientific and messianic aspects of the nonphilosophical project are held together in fragile *superposition*: a science-in-Christ. A “science gathered together under the name of Christ” (124). A science of resurrection.

Early on in *Christo-Fiction*, Laruelle writes: “If you must have a governing thesis or principle [for this work] then here it is, in all its brutality: “*the fusion of christology and quantum physics ‘under’ quantum theory in its generic power, and no longer under theology*” (xiv, emphasis in original). This fusion works to reveal “the generic essence of Christ” (xv). Put otherwise, a “christic messianity [is] obtained through the quantum treatment of the theo-christic doublet” (67). At the heart of *Christo-Fiction* is a concern for this messianity. However, if *Christo-Fiction* is *not*, as Laruelle contends, a work of Christian theology, nor any kind of “exercise in supposedly infallible dogma” (xiv), it is nevertheless a work devoted to the figure of Christ. As signaled by its subtitle, Laruelle frames this engagement with Christ in terms of the so-called “Athens-Jerusalem” problem.⁷ The Athens-Jerusalem nexus indexes the “two poles” of what he calls the “substantial religions”: “Pagan Logos” and “Jewish Torah” (136). They index, moreover, “two extreme law-materials” (139): the Greek law as “vicious circle” and the Judaic law as “infinite obedience” (140). For Laruelle, then, Christ is a “law-event,” a “generic law,” the law as depotentialization and suspension (140). “Christ,” he declares, “is the law fulfilled as the immanence of messianity” (140). In what follows, we will attempt to draw out what we take to be some of the most valuable and compelling aspects of *Christo-Fiction*, as well as to indicate its limitations for scholars of Islamicate thought.

Christo-Fiction should be understood as a kind of “thought experiment”—or, better, “a faith experiment” (xi). As mentioned above, the fusion of quantum physics and Christology is Laruelle’s guiding principle. This fusion, he suggests, will lead us away from the

⁴ Laruelle, *Anti-Badiou*, 29.

⁵ Laruelle’s *Christo-Fiction* and *Introduction to Non-Marxism* in some ways mirror—or radicalize—Michel Henry’s astonishing Christological-Marxist diptych: *I Am the Truth: Toward a Philosophy of Christianity* and *Marx: A Philosophy of Human Reality*. And Laruelle’s nonphilosophy finds its closest (philosophical) analogue in Henry’s radical phenomenology. That said, in *Christo-Fiction*, Laruelle offers a critique of Henry’s transcendental philosophy of Life and his incarnational philosophy of Christ.

⁶ Anthony Paul Smith, “Laruelle and the Messiah Before the Saints,” in *The Postmodern Saints of France: Reconfiguring the Holy in Contemporary French Philosophy*, ed. Colby Dickinson (London and New York: T&T Clark, 2013), 250.

⁷ For a comprehensive discussion of the Athens-Jerusalem problem, see Willi Goetschel, “Athens, Jerusalem, and the Orient Express of Philosophy,” *Bamidbar: Journal for Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 1 (2011): 9-34.

authoritarianism or sufficiency of philosophy and theology and towards the radical immanence or genericity—the very *ordinariness*—of Christ. A brief comment should be made here about Laruelle’s nonphilosophical methodology: just as nonphilosophy is not the negation of philosophy, nonstandard theology is not the negation of Christianity. It seeks, rather, to depotentialize theological *sufficiency* and “to deprive it of its claims to omnipotence” (6). Sufficiency is, then, the *belief* that thought can co-determine or “capture” the radical passivity or “true poverty”⁸ of what Laruelle calls the “One” or “Real.” The Church, for example, *believes* that it is “sufficient to think Christ-in-person” (x). However, it is this very sovereign self-sufficiency—or “antigrace” (97)—that occludes the messianity—or grace—of Christ. Here, Laruelle modifies the distinction between faith and belief. “Belief,” he explains, “is the sufficiency of God, but faith is the nonsufficiency of Christ” (xi). The movement from theology to nonstandard theology is, then, a movement from sufficiency to nonsufficiency—from sovereignty to weakness. Only here, in this passage, do we encounter the generic Christ. Furthermore, if philosophy and theology are characterized by this belief, a belief that submits theological thought to a “mythical circularity” (194), then faith is an attempt to think *from* the foreclosure of Christ; it is an attempt to think from this “immanence that bears the name of Christ” (32). Christ underdetermines circularity. Theology declines. The foreclosure of Christ works to “abase” transcendence. And violence is, for Laruelle, a kind of transcendence; it is the hubristic and hallucinatory attempt to capture the messianity of Christ, the weakness of the human, the finitude of the One. This identification of violence and transcendence opens up onto a reinterpretation of original sin. Sin, Laruelle suggests, does not entail a fall; instead, “it is more an attempt at elevation and overgrowth, a negation of the generic state of humans” (251). In this overgrowth, we suffer a “loss of the generic through an excess of transcendence” (251). A Christic “nonaction,” by contrast, resides in radical immanence—in weakness, radical passivity, and insufficiency. In this respect, nonstandard theology is close to the thinking of Walter Benjamin; it is a kind of messianic “critique of violence.” And there are echoes here of Benjamin’s account of “overnaming”:⁹ to philosophize is precisely to overname the Real. To theologize is to overname Christ. (Put otherwise: “For the One, the World is a redundancy.”¹⁰) To practice nonphilosophy is, then, to weaken and simplify the name—it is to make “*use-of-silence*.”¹¹

It is this generic “nonsufficiency” that licenses the experimental and “fictional” practice of *Christo-Fiction*. What is a fiction? Importantly, a fiction, for Laruelle, is not a fable. Here, Laruelle is explicitly critiquing Alain Badiou’s work on Saint Paul. In Badiou’s reading of Paul, the Christ-event yields only a model—however crystalline—of the formal structure of post-evental subjectivation. This model, however, remains a fable that “fails to touch on any Real.”¹² And yet, Laruelle asks: “The materialist decision with no foundation other than that

⁸ François Laruelle, *Principles of Non-Philosophy*, trans. Nicola Rubczak and Anthony Paul Smith (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 151.

⁹ See Walter Benjamin, “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man,” in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings* Vol. 1, 1913-1926, eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 73.

¹⁰ François Laruelle, *Philosophies of Difference*, trans. Rocco Gangle (New York and London: Continuum, 2010), 179.

¹¹ François Laruelle, *General Theory of Victims*, trans. Alex Dubilet and Jessie Hock (Cambridge: Polity, 2015), 71—emphasis in original.

¹² Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundations of Universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), 4.

of declaring the Christ-event a fable—does this suffice for we-the-humans?”¹³ For Laruelle, to compose a christo-fiction is not, then, to submit religion “to the realm of illusion”—“that reason is not ours,” he writes, “that materialism is not the materiality of the blood and flesh of Christ” (x)—but is rather an attempt at “treating it experimentally and for a new thought.”¹⁴ In this experimental treatment, theology is “without any traction on the foreclosed Christ” (113). Theology does not touch the Real; it is, rather, irreversibly and unilaterally determined by the Real. Theology becomes a nonstandard means in a “discipline of Christ that, while still fictional, is this time rigorous” (ix). Standard theological concepts—the Incarnation, the Cross, the Entombment, the Resurrection, the Ascension—are thus depotentialized, mutated, and simplified. In each case, Laruelle works to save a “christic kernel” from the excesses of theology—from “a garment that is too vast, too transcendent for the generic Christ” (76). In this way, *Christo-Fiction* “is a defense of Christ against Christianity” (113).

Who, then, is this generic Christ? “Christ,” Laruelle writes, “is not a term in the conceptual architecture of a theology, but the name of a constant, the name of the messianic element of human life: the element of the immanence of the lived that finds its form in the algebraic imaginary of science, not in the imaginary of religions” (233). This emphasis on the radical immanence of Christ serves to distance Laruelle from a number of more recent—post-secular or post-theological—engagements with the question of the messianic.¹⁵ Specifically, Laruelle’s is not an “empty and formal” messianism (173). It does not trace a “countertime” (199). Instead, Laruelle works to “desuture” (58) Christ from the Church. That is, if the Church destroys messianity in dogma and deferral, in a “calcified return of waiting” (227), then the generic Christ must be distinguished from an “*institutionalized messiah*” (227, emphasis in original). There is no *parousia*, no second coming, no repetition, no return—Laruelle’s is a messianism deprived of any structure of anticipation. (It is neither prophetic nor apostolic.) “The immanent messianic law,” Laruelle writes, *is* “the law of nonreturn” (228). The Messiah cannot be awaited. Instead, messianity is lived; it is a “semiformal legality woven into the lived” (155). In this enfleshed and radically immanent weave of life and law, faith becomes an “immanent praxis” (68). If philosophy and theology are characterized by a constitutive decisionism, then faith, Laruelle suggests, is a decision “that has fallen into its own immanence” (251). In this downfall, messianity announces the immanent “being-foreclosed” or non-relationality of the human. The Messiah subtracts and is subtracted; it is the “nothing-of-the-world” (256). In other words, “there is no traceability of the messiah” (176). This is, for Laruelle, a *positive* subtraction—it is an “insurrection.” “There is no essential withdrawal for Christ himself,” he writes. Instead, “messianity has a positive subtractive-being, it is insurrectional by nature, it is representation that retires itself or is rejected under the effect of the messianic under-going” (245).

Accordingly, the ethical intensity that resides at the heart of any thinking of the messianic shifts from an anticipation of the “transcendent messiah” (140) to the actuality of the generic Messiah. We move, then, from an ethics of just action and vigilant anticipation to an ethics of “nonaction” and “nonreturn.” From the Levinasian “law of Other” to the

¹³ Laruelle, *Anti-Badiou*, 37.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ For an overview of the messianic as a “sub-concern” of the “return to religion,” see Anna Glazova and Paul North, “Introduction: Saving Hope, the Wager of Messianism,” in *Messianic Thought Outside Theology*, eds. Anna Glazova and Paul North (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 1-11. For a broader historical perspective, see Pierre Bouretz’s monumental *Witnesses for the Future: Philosophy and Messianism*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2010).

internalization of the “New Law” of the “Same” (148). Here, the Messiah has “the sovereignty of the weak, a welcoming or unmoved Indifference” (114). In this indifference, Laruelle tells us, “the messiah is the stripping-bare of man of all the predicates that situate him in the world and impose upon him his coordinates, trajectories, theological positions, and relations, his being as a sinner and his becoming redeemed” (145). In this “stripping-bare,” messianity confronts what Jacques Derrida describes as the “first violence”: predication.¹⁶ This gets close to the heart of non-philosophy: messianity, the Messiah’s “devastating nonaction” (147), suspends the predicative violence of the world; “the power of remaining the Same is the resumed messianity that depotentializes violence” (173). Christ, the “Last Instance” (234), suspends the first violence of the world.

Messianity is, then, “a flux that ceaselessly penetrates the world that tries to dam it up but that it swathes, as the night sky swathes its stars” (89). There is an aspect of messianic *inexistence* to the human—this virtuality, this night sky—that resists the violence of existence. In this way, human messianity is mostly synonymous, for Laruelle, with the One; it is the refusal and depotentialization of any totalizing subject position; it is the refusal of “the harassment of the world” (243). “Radical human identity,” Laruelle declares in no uncertain terms, “is separated from the World [*monde*], unclean [*im-monde*] as Lacan would say, or holy.”¹⁷ This weakness or holiness disempowers judgment, decision, legislation. To be holy is to be foreclosed. It is to be “affected by a secret” (240). According to Laruelle, this human foreclosure “inverts” phenomenological intentionality: the world transcends *towards* the human.¹⁸ It transgresses. The human devastates and is devastated by the world—this is, perhaps, what it means to be a “glorious body” (209). This is not to say, then, that the human is untouched by violence.¹⁹ Far from it. Rather, the human remains the *same*; human messianity—this “impotence of idempotence” (114)—is a weakness that passes “‘under’ the world or under the waterline” (183). For Laruelle, Christ names this sameness: “Christ is our ‘hard-and-fast’ fortress” (173). A Laruellean nontheology is, then, ultimately an account of foreclosure—of indifference, inexistence, nonacting, passivity—and of “messianic grace” (223). This, Laruelle tells us, is “the only grace now conceivable” (181): grace as under-going. Grace as separation, holiness, decline. The Messiah as “non-event.”²⁰ The world transcends *towards* the human; messianity subtracts the faithful from the world (243).²¹

If, for Laruelle, the human is separated from the world, then it is also an “immeasurable weakness.”²² The human is both persecuted—“the victimizable *par excellence*”²³—and a participant in the “nonbeing” of messianity (240). This theorization of messianity and weakness, of messianity *as* weakness, as a *weakening*, suggests nothing less than a theory of justice. “Man-in-person is not commutative with the human subjects that partake of it,” Laruelle writes. “[T]his is the root of justice.”²⁴ Genericity, messianity, and “righteousness”

¹⁶ Jacques Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas,” in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 147.

¹⁷ François Laruelle, *Intellectuals and Power: The Insurrection of the Victim*, trans. Anthony Paul Smith (Cambridge: Polity, 2015), 29.

¹⁸ Laruelle, *General Theory of Victims*, 24.

¹⁹ For Laruelle, the reduction of a human to a subject is *the* definition of torture. See *ibid.*, 127.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 108.

²¹ Compare with François Laruelle, *Introduction to Non-Marxism*, trans. Anthony Paul Smith (Minneapolis: Univocal, 2015), 193.

²² François Laruelle, *Future Christ: A Lesson in Heresy*, trans. Anthony Paul Smith (London: Continuum, 2010), 17. See also, Laruelle, *General Theory of Victims*, 92.

²³ *Ibid.*, 98.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, xix.

are therefore interarticulated in non-philosophy: “only the ways of generic humanity are right or aspire to righteousness.”²⁵ If we are to take the full measure of Laruelle’s nonphilosophy, then we must account for this interarticulation. Nonphilosophy is a profound—we might say ethico-messianic—meditation on the question of a justice. Here, in this thinking together of messianity and weakness, the Messiah and the weak, we encounter the “generic justice of the oppressed.”²⁶ We encounter Christ as “*the last messiah as before-first*” (36, emphasis in original). The christo-fiction is, we could say, inseparable from the “utopia” or “philo-fiction” of justice.²⁷ Put otherwise, the ethical actuality of the nonphilosophical project must be grasped in its proper nontheological context. This is to take seriously Laruelle’s claim that nonphilosophy is a programmatic messianism—a messianism, that is, of depotentialization, disempowering, and human insurrection.²⁸ A messianism of the weak.

However, the Christocentrism of this work will provide a number of difficulties for Islamicate scholars interested in Laruelle’s nonstandard theology. Islam is only mentioned three times in the text. The question is, then, can we think a generic messianity of Islam? Can this law-event of Christ go by other names? Can a nonstandard theology mutate—and be mutated by—the “law-material” of Islam? Can we imagine a theological insufficiency beyond the ruins of Athens and Jerusalem? Can we think a “non-Islam”?²⁹ Let us emphasize here that *Christo-Fiction* is not a dogma; it is, rather, an “essay in the vision-of-Christ-in-Christ” (xiv). There are other essays to be written. For Laruelle, this is a call to “de-Christianize Christian notions, de-Judaize Jewish notions, de-Islamicize Islamic notions, and place them all in the service of the defence of those who have been their victims. It is not a question of carrying out a negation of these cultures but of ensuring their mutation into materials and thus also models of the new ethics.”³⁰ Which is to say: our fictions—these “models of the new ethics”—must be “under-determined” by what Laruelle calls, in a startling formulation, “the counter-witness to nihilism”:³¹ the *victim*. In this under-determination, thought is “configured by messianity, the messiah that haunts the world” (236). These formulations must be read together (read together they concentrate the ethical force of a nontheology): the victim (the counter-witness) is the messiah that haunts the world. “The victim carries with it resurrection.”³² Finally, it is a call to invent. In *Christo-Fiction*, Laruelle writes: “Cease treating the Scriptures, whatever they may be (Hebraic, Islamic, Christian, Philosophical), as sacred and fetishized texts. Invent your Gospels, those that the Churches ignore or that they are obliged to bury in the desert” (159). This, then, would be the promise of a nontheological messianity: there are fictions of the messiah, of “our ordinary messiahs,”³³ to be composed with and beyond the figure of Christ.

²⁵ François Laruelle, “Principles for a Generic Ethics,” *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 19, no. 2 (2014): 21.

²⁶ Laruelle, *General Theory of Victims*, 34.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, xxi.

²⁸ Here, Laruelle’s account of messianic depotentialization is very close to Giorgio Agamben’s theory of destituent power. Moreover, both are theorists of weakness, non-relation, messianism, and inoperativity. See Giorgio Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016), 263-279.

²⁹ We cannot overstate the importance of Smith’s work on nonphilosophical messianity and Islamic messianism; see his “Nature Deserves to Be Side by Side with the Angels,” *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 19, no. 1 (2014): 151-169.

³⁰ Laruelle, *General Theory of Victims*, 124.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 44.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*, 121.

Michael Saunders
PhD Student, Department of Performance and Screen Studies
Kingston University

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