

Milovan Novaković*

Faculty of Media and Communication, Singidunum University, Belgrade, Serbia

Nicholas Gaskill and A. J. Nocek (eds.). *The Lure of Whitehead*. Minneapolis: University Of Minnesota Press, 2014, 427 pp., ISBN 9780816679966

We are only now beginning to take part in a great philosophical *event* that was concluded more than a half century ago: the adventure of thought of Alfred North Whitehead. But what was happening in the meantime with the name Whitehead, with his process philosophy, with his *philosophy of organism*? Was his philosophical *magnum opus*, his *Process and Reality*, condemned to misunderstanding due to its incredibly abundant, impenetrable yet precisely constructed conceptual apparatus – so much inaccessible that a few years ago it deserved its own special technical glossary?¹ Was it under the influence of other, less significant, but numerous more dominant currents that this speculative adventure was shrouded with a cloud of condemnation for the metaphysical aberration? Was process *theology* the reason why philosophers were rashly retreating from process *philosophy*? Finally, were the exponents of rationalism² responsible for the fact that Whitehead's philosophy, as well as the philosophy of Charles S. Peirce and William James, was put aside and almost forgotten?

For the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, that was certainly the case.³ It was Deleuze to whom the present tendency to place Whitehead's philosophy in the center of philosophical investigation owes its first stimulus. The merit of Deleuze was not only the fact that in his books⁴ he indicates the importance of Whitehead's notion

¹ John B. Cobb, the main exponent of the process theology movement, published a special dictionary of terms that appear in *Process and Reality*: John B. Cobb, *A Glossary with Alphabetical Index to Technical Terms in Process and Reality* (Claremont, CA: P&F Press, 2008).

² In a recently discovered letter to his personal assistant Henry S. Leonard, about Russell, Wittgenstein and Carnap, the main advocates of logical positivism, Whitehead says: "They are bright boys, representative of a stage of rationalism, but nothing more", *Process Studies Supplement* 17 (2011): 72.

³ Deleuze accused Wittgenstein and logical positivism for debasing Whitehead's thinking in his course on event held in Vincennes, 10. 03. 1987: "J'accuse Wittgenstein d'avoir assassiné Whitehead... à une sorte d'essayiste n'osant plus parler de logique." <https://www.le-terrier.net/deleuze/14leibniz10-03-87.htm>

⁴ For example, see the chapter "What is event" in *The Fold: Leibniz and Baroque* (London: Continuum, 2006), 86–95, or the very short mention in Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 284.

of event, but that his very own philosophy establishes certain relations with process philosophy. In all noteworthy recent studies that deal with the reinterpretation of concepts from Whitehead's philosophy, i.e. in the comprehensive books by Isabelle Stengers and Stephen Shaviro,⁵ Deleuze plays the role of the original and inspirational Whitehead *diadoque*. However, in his books Deleuze has not thoroughly worked out his relation with Whitehead, leaving others to concern themselves with reinforcing those relations, as well as to establish new conceptual and intellectual relationships. That is the reason why in the last fifteen years we can witness a great influx of various articles which thoroughly take into consideration the multiple philosophical intersections of these two thinkers.

What then is the lure of Whitehead's philosophy? This collection, as its very title indicates, seeks to intensify and bring us closer to that lure, to *regenerate* processes of our thinking, encouraging the reader to break through the gradually plowed furrows of Whitehead's dense and hardly penetrable philosophy. The intention of the fifteen works assembled here, as the editors write in the introduction, is "offering a coherent description of experience against the divisions and judgments of modern philosophy; articulating a conceptual scheme capable of affirming genuine novelty; and proposing an ecological and non-anthropocentric framework for analysis."⁶

The first section of the collection, entitled *Speculation beyond the Bifurcation*, opens with an essay by Isabelle Stengers, "Constructivist Reading of *Process and Reality*", in which this leading scientist and expert on Whitehead's philosophy manages to sum up her previously crystallized ideas. With her constructivist approach to Whitehead, she wants to avoid the wrong scientific and philosophical endeavor that would diminish Whitehead's speculative philosophy to the reductionist formation of some "conception of the world". Her constructivist approach, entirely different from deconstructivism, which always ends in some "social construction", in contrast, "emphasizes the need to actively and explicitly relate any knowledge-production to the question that it tries to answer, and refuses to transform knowledge into the kind of neutral statement that comes from nowhere and that could be called a 'conception of the world.'"⁷ Taking the cue from the critics of scientific reductionism, Jeffrey A. Bell in his historically-guided presentation follows the line of thinkers that starts from Hume, goes through the philosophical projects of Husserl and Whitehead, and ends with Deleuze's path of thought. Then follows the juncture of two lectures of Bruno Latour: the first, in which the French philosopher links Whitehead with Gabriel Tarde (and his interpretation of the notion of "differentiation"), and vividly suggests the

⁵ Isabelle Stengers, *Thinking with Whitehead* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011); Steven Shaviro, *Without Criteria: Kant, Whitehead, Deleuze, and Aesthetics* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2012). Also *The Allure of Things* (London, Oxford, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), edited by Roland Faber and Andrew Goffey, with a couple of essays that analyze relations between Whitehead and Deleuze.

⁶ Nicholas Gaskill and A. J. Nocek, ed., *The Lure of Whitehead* (Minneapolis: University Of Minnesota Press, 2014), 2.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 44.

term “kayaking”, in order to describe a more fluent passage through processual elements of experience, in contrast to the hard modernistic “bridging” of the different orders (opposite shores) of reality; and the second, in which Latour, finding the same source for the modern model of abstraction in science and art, shows that previous *matters of fact* (a modernist, indisputable, solid, simply present thing) must be replaced by what he specifically calls *matters of concern*⁸, to point at a different sort of aesthetic and scientific facts capable of rising interest (being loved, says Latour), to move but still remain the *matter*.

The second section, *Metaphysics of Creativity*, minutely considers the relationships of Whitehead’s understanding of creativity and Deleuze’s “metaphysics of new”. It opens with an essay by Peter Canning, in which the author tries to demonstrate how mechanistic thinking could be broken by introducing the power of creation and accident in our descriptions of the world. To question the existence of eternal objects as necessary for the unfolding of actual occasions as accidents of creativity, Canning resorts to Mallarmé and Spinoza, to demonstrate how chance, without any high or eternal instance, “accomplishes its own Idea.”⁹ Essays by Faber, Robinson and Harman introduce Deleuze’s philosophy of new and elaborate links and differences between those two thinkers: Faber demonstrates why both of them were forced, in their later essays such as “Immortality” and “Immanence: life”, to recourse to mystical language, and how Deleuze’s “virtualities” and Whitehead’s “eternal objects” function as analogous; Robinson’s preview, also, accentuates the difference between Deleuze’s and Whitehead’s concept of event, but by putting emphasis on the differences in their understanding of temporality; while Harman, making a distinction between the notions of *process*, *becoming* and *relation*, considers recent conjugations of Whitehead and Deleuze (in books by Isabelle Stengers and Stephen Shaviro) too tight and incorrect when equalizing and reconciling Deleuze’s thesis on the “pre-individual” realm with Whitehead’s “world made up entirely of distinct individuals”.¹⁰

Authors gathered in the third section, *Process Ecology*, assign themselves the task to break with the anthropocentric scheme and limitations of modern philosophy, pleading for an extended “ecology of experience”. The most interesting essays in this section are signed by Stephen Meyer and A. J. Nocek. Meyer outlines a possible historical context for the development of Whitehead’s key notion of “experiential togetherness”, linking it with definitions of that notion by James (whom Whitehead calls the American Plato¹¹), Alexander, etc. Nocek, in a neo-vitalist way, suggests that what is required, in order to avoid the idealization of the real, is “Whitehead’s speculative

⁸ Latour probably takes over Whitehead’s “Quaker” term “concern”. For instance, Whitehead says: “concern’ at once places the object as a component in the experience of the subject”. A. N. Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas* (New York: The Free Press, 1967), 176.

⁹ Canning takes the quote from Mallarmé’s *Igitur*, 167.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 233.

¹¹ In a letter to his student Charles Hartshorne; excerpts of this letter are cited in Scott Sinklair, “William James as American Plato,” *William James Studies* 4 (2009): 112.

pragmatics of life, which, far from representing a thought-independent state of affairs, brings into being the experience of the nonorganic life of matter.”¹²

Finally, as the authors themselves emphasize, the lure of Whitehead’s philosophy lies in the unlimited number of questions and problems which it succeeds to raise. For that reason, this collection is not assembled with the intention to put an end to Whitehead’s grand speculative project. To this poet of philosophy and philosophic assemblage-maker, philosophy starts but also ends with a wondering. Actually, philosophy itself is an unending multiplication of wonderings. And by multiplying questions about Whitehead’s wonderings, this collection surely deserves to be called an interpretative and conceptually complex wonder.

¹² Gaskill and Nocek, ed., *The Lure of Whitehead*, 32.