

DIDIER DEBAISE

Nature as Event

THOUGHT IN THE ACT

A series edited by Erin Manning and Brian Massumi

Nature as Event

The Lure of the Possible



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Translated by Michael Halewood

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L'appât des possibles – Reprise de Whitehead © 2015
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Printed in the United States of America on acid-free
paper ∞
Designed by Matthew Tauch
Typeset in Garamond Premier Pro by Copperline Books

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Names: Debaise, Didier, author. Title: Nature as event: the lure of the possible / Didier Debaise; translated by Michael Halewood. Other titles: Appat des possibles. English | Thought in the act. Description: Durham: Duke University Press, 2017. Series: Thought in the act Identifiers: LCCN 2017009715 (print) LCCN 2017012718 (ebook) ISBN 9780822369332 (hardcover : alk. paper) ISBN 9780822369486 (pbk. : alk. paper) ISBN 9780822372424 (ebook) Subjects: LCSH: Whitehead, Alfred North, 1861-1947. Philosophy of nature. Classification: LCC B1674.W354 (ebook) LCC B1674.W354 D4313 2017 (print) | DDC 113—dc23



Translated with the financial support of the University Foundation of Belgium.

LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2017009715

Cover art: Ernst Haeckel, *Kunstformen der Natur*, plate 85: Ascidiae. Leipzig und Wien: Verlag des Bibliographischen Instituts, 1899–1904.

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Introduction

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Our experience of nature is threatened by a growing tension between, on the one hand, the modern conception of nature that we have inherited, permeating each of our thoughts, and, on the other, current ecological changes. It seems that this tension has today reached a point of no return. The concepts we deploy, the abstractions we construct, our very modes of thought are no longer able to deepen or develop our experience of nature; they only obscure its meaning.

This book aims to outline the conditions for a different way of thinking about nature by rekindling certain propositions that can be found in the philosophy of Whitehead. This return to Whitehead might appear surprising. Although his work on cosmology has been hailed by philosophers as diverse as Bergson, Dewey, Merleau-Ponty, and Deleuze, beyond these specific instances his work has remained little known and has had little influence.² It is perhaps this position on the margins of the principal movements in contemporary philosophy that explains the renewed interest in Whitehead's thought over recent years. It seems that the reasons for his marginal status are precisely those that now make his work so relevant, as if the strangeness of the questions that animated him, and the speculative and cosmological claims that pervade his work, were inaudible for a time but have today, and against all expectations, become central to current concerns.³ By developing recent texts on Whitehead's philosophy, I will suggest that

his work provides new tools for thinking the modern invention of nature and also establishes the conditions for going beyond this, moving toward what I would like to call a "universal mannerism."

This book, therefore, has two aims: to show that the modern conception of nature does not express any genuine ontological position (dualist or monist) but is essentially operative, and it is the status of these operations that needs to be traced and questioned if we want to understand how a specific representation of nature has come to impose itself upon us. The heart of this operation, its constitutive gesture, its hallmark, is the division of nature into two heterogeneous modes of existence, whose paradigmatic expression is the difference between "primary" and "secondary" qualities. It is from this distinction that all of the divisions between beings, all the oppositions between their attributes and their aspects, are derived: existence and value; real nature and apparent nature; fact and interpretation. The second aim involves introducing the term "universal mannerism" to indicate a way of overcoming the strictures imposed by this operation. I want to argue that being and manner are intermingled and that there are as many modes of existence in nature as there are ways of experiencing, of feeling, of making sense, and of granting importance to things. The sense of value, of importance, and of purpose—which in our modern experience of nature come under the notion of "psychic additions," of projections by humans of something onto nature that it would otherwise lack—are to be found everywhere, from the most elementary forms of life of microorganisms to reflexive consciousness. The speculative question that runs through this book is as follows: how to grant due importance to the multiplicity of ways of being within nature?

Notes

INTRODUCTION

- I For more on this subject, see Emilie Hache, *Ce à quoi nous tenons: Propositions pour une écologie pragmatique* (Paris: Les Empêcheurs de penser en rond, 2011).
- 2 Beyond the purely philosophical sphere, I am thinking of works such as Conrad Hal Waddington, The Strategy of Genes: A Discussion of Some Aspects of Theoretical Biology (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1957); Joseph Needham, The Refreshing River (Nottingham, UK: Spokesman, 1943); and also Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers, La Nouvelle alliance: Métamorphose de la science (Paris: Gallimard, 1986).
- For more on this, see Isabelle Stengers, *Thinking with Whitehead* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).
- This is a notion that I have taken from Deleuze's description, in *The Fold*, of Leibniz's approach as a philosophy of manners. "The Stoics and Leibniz invent a mannerism that is opposed to the essentialism first of Aristotle and then of Descartes. Mannerism as a composite of the Baroque is inherited from a Stoic mannerism that is now extended to the cosmos. A third great logic of the event will come with Whitehead"; Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold* (London: Athlone Press, 1993), 53. Deleuze also cites an extract from Leibniz's *New Essays on Human Understanding* in which Leibniz writes, "The kinds and degrees of perfection vary up to infinity, but as regards the foundation of things. The foundations are everywhere the same; this is a fundamental maxim for me, which governs my whole philosophy. But if this philosophy is the simplest in resources it is also the richest in kinds [of effects]" (*Fold*, 150). In this sense, I have no hesitation in situating this project in a mannerist philosophy in the forms of the neo-monadology that can be found as much in Whitehead as in Tarde or Ruyer.