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UFD0054  Robin Mackay

Paths of the Sea: On Approaching Gilles Grelet's *Theory of the Solitary Sailor*

Robin Mackay provides an introduction to Gilles Grelet's disciplined yet poetic book in which biography and antiphilosophy combine in a unique and startling way, charting the sources of Grelet's thinking and the mode of life he has constructed in order to realise it

How long have I endured already and been dwelling in the world!

Ginza Rabba¹

My entire being was in things that were foreign to me.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau²

Here speaks the man of the masts and sails, to whom the sea is not a navigable element, but an intimate companion.

Joseph Conrad³

Theory of the Solitary Sailor is a book that could very well not have been written, and the world would barely have noticed. Yet even unwritten, it would have silently insisted. Is it a book of philosophy? It is a biography, a confession even, the writing of a life which, as its author admits, boasts no

An antiphilosophical biography whose sole claim is that of being a faithful transcription of the life of a human in search of a disciplined method to hold the world at a distance

spectacular qualities to commend it to the reader, and a theoretical essay that violently repudiates the speculative satisfactions of philosophy. An antiphilosophical biography, then, whose sole claim—but it is a rare one—is that of being a faithful transcription, with as much theoretical elaboration as necessary and no more, of the life of a human in search of a disciplined method to hold the world at a distance without stumbling back into its cloying embrace or diving headlong into the abyss.

An exemplary work of 'restricted action', 'to the extent that one separates from it as author', it is also a book that 'needs no reader [...] it takes place all by itself: finished, existing'⁴ And yet there is a certain

1. Cited in H. Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2001), 53.

2. J.-J. Rousseau, *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, tr. P. France (London: Penguin, 2004), 123.

3. J. Conrad, 'The Mirror of the Sea', in *A Personal Record and The Mirror of the Sea* (London: Penguin, 1998), 196.

4. S. Mallarmé, 'Restricted Action', in *Divagations*, tr. B. Johnson (Cambridge, MA and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 215–19: 219 [translation modified].

reader who has need of it: one afflicted by a disquiet that will not be assuaged by the illusory indulgences of the world—or even those of philosophy, which only relays the perpetual harassment of the worldly in another register.

Rousseau was prey to such affliction: having ‘learned from early experience that [he] was not made for this world, and that in it [he] would never attain the state to which [his] heart aspired’, and having ceased ‘to seek among men the happiness which [he] felt [he] could never find there’, the young Jean-Jacques’s ‘ardent imagination learned to leap over the boundaries of a life which was as yet hardly begun, as if it were flying over an alien land in search of a fixed and stable resting-place’.⁵ Rousseau is one of the guiding spirits of Grelet’s book, and yet its ‘resting place’, the alien element upon which it finds stillness, is neither fixed nor stable; the movement of its author is that of the solitary sailor, for whom the reiteration of the monotonous circle of the sea replaces the line of flight, and circumscription takes priority over motion.

Written in Stone

At the age of forty—the very same age that Rousseau set himself ‘as the end of [his] efforts to succeed, the final term of [his] various ambitions’,⁶ Grelet similarly committed himself to a ‘reformation’⁷ involving a ‘total renunciation of the world and the great love of solitude’.⁸ He left the city to live permanently on the sea, with no plans to return to land. Since that time he has rarely left his sailing boat *Théorème* for more than a few hours at a time. This departure, an act of radical refusal that entailed a process of patiently undoing, point by point, the ties that attach humans to the world, is inseparable from Grelet’s ongoing campaign of antiphilosophy, a concerted attack in theory upon what passes for reality, the extraction of a generic humanity, understood (following a certain Rousseau) as essentially solitary, from its entanglement with the world.

The decision having been taken for this radical departure, why write? Why even expose this short tract to the public—after all, couldn’t one simply defy the

Couldn’t one simply leave, allowing silence to reign in one’s wake?

chattering of the world by opting out? Couldn’t one simply leave, allowing silence to reign in one’s wake?

But the assumption that simplicity is so easy to come by reduces radical departure to a demand for repose, nothing more than a holiday whose respite would prepare one to rejoin the world. A wholly inadequate response to an inquietude that demands nothing less than the forging of an entire existential discipline. The type of writing essayed in *Theory of the Solitary Sailor*—a writing that breaks the silence from which it emerges at the same time as it seeks to transcribe that silence without denaturing it—is born of a commitment which, were it less thoroughgoing, would indeed have counselled prudence and a simple retreat from letters. But let Rousseau say it: ‘[T]his prudence was itself so foreign to me [...] I persevered’.⁹ *Theory of the Solitary Sailor* is a treatise on and of perseverance. Departure is fraught with ‘problems, difficulties, objections, complexities, and obscurities’, as Jean-Jacques soon discovered.¹⁰ To imagine that one could ‘simply leave’ is to mistake simplicity for ease, and departure for a decision that can be taken once and for all. To become a sailor takes more than simply boarding, and the solitary sailor is a very particular figure, defined by their difference from those who haul the baggage of the world aboard with them and annex the sea to the land. Theoretical negotiation and a certain form of writing become necessary at the point where this continued labour of departure is concentrated.

On the other hand there is the philosopher’s error of becoming caught up—ensnared for life, even—in the nets of this necessary detour from the simple. Unmoved by the temptation to become a virtuoso of the concept, Grelet remains resolutely fixed upon the sole task to which he has dedicated himself. No complacency, no indulgence of an easy route that will inevitably prove illusory, but also no allowing complexity to become a source of vainglory, a means of persistent deferral (or *différance*) of the return to a real that is home port and destination.

5. Rousseau, *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, 48.

6. Ibid., 50.

7. Ibid., 51.

8. Ibid., 53.

9. Ibid., 54.

10. Ibid., 53.

Although certainly not lacking, theoretical sophistications intervene here only to the extent that they are required in order to cut a course toward simplicity. The blank unease of the page is marked with exactly the right amount of words and no more, in a fastidiously assessed, sparse, deliberate speech. This mineral poetics, although formulaic and punctual—both a sequential set of requirements and a punching of holes in the world—describes a continuous and graceful movement: like a series of points on a nautical chart plotting a manoeuvre undertaken in partnership with wind and tide; between human and world, land and sea, reality and the real, a dotted line: *tear here* [0.1].¹¹

A characteristic of this type of writing—to anticipate somewhat, a writing of *gnosis* in which a series of iconic waypoints indicate a heading toward something that cannot be taught—is that it takes application, meditation, and practice to stay its course. Grelet's footnotes provide additional contextual, narrative, and discursive orientation but, having read them attentively, it becomes possible to traverse the text without their aid and, point by point, to truly join its movement. *Theory of the Solitary Sailor* is a work that demands the repeated reading necessary to achieve this fluency.

Departure cannot be achieved in thought alone. Theory without subjectivation is empty, and there is no subjectivation without experimental action

But the real challenge it poses to the reader is one of subjectivation: departure cannot be achieved in thought alone. Theory without subjectivation is empty, and there is no subjectivation without experimental action, action which in turn is rudderless without the guidance of theoretical principles. The two parts of *Theory of the Solitary Sailor* reflect this articulation of subject-of-theory and theory-of-subjectivation: *Canon of Circumscription/Organon of Sailing*. The *Canon*, a theory of method, probes and enumerates the criteria for effective rebellion, the methodical requirements that must be satisfied in

order for circumscription from the world to be more than a doomed pretence. It provides both a diagnosis of the malaise to be combatted and an instrument with which to gauge the heading. At the same time it is a *cannon* to arm the melancholy void of the human-nothing-but-human against the violent inrush of the world—as if the sea had to be fiercely defended against the shores that encroach upon it. The *Organon* then presents the method of theory, the course followed by one life dedicated to a practice informed by this canon, the practice of sailing. Where the canon diagrammatically delineates the *space* of theory, the organon is concerned with the deployment of the canonical exigencies in *time*, and thus addresses their durability or viability: what was conceptual schema becomes lived rhythm, silence sustained through the repetition of circumscription that is sailing.

Grelet's demonstration that existential commitment alone completes theory, so foreign to the cosmopolitanism of the Sunday sailors (and surfers) of the philosophical profession, is one of the reasons why this extraordinary work ought to prompt nothing but shame among the 'radical philosophers' of the world—and indeed Grelet is harsh upon even those he regards as his 'masters'. Perhaps ultimately the philosophical references matter less than Grelet's select library of maritime scribes, authors of books of the sea that are not romances but biographical traces of those who have known the sea and suffered its ravages and its epiphanies, those whose writing is full of the sailor's *odi et amo*, in the words of Joseph Conrad, foremost among them. Nonetheless, three cardinal references provide a theoretical armature for Grelet's theory, even if its singular trajectory can hardly be deduced from the sum of their influences.

From Non-Philosophy to Theorrorism

First of all, Grelet follows François Laruelle in pursuing a 'human knowledge', a science of the human that refuses to subject the human to philosophical articulation. It seeks rather to speak for and hold fast to the immanence of the human-real before its dismemberment into the various abstract capacities and attributes from which the philosopher then re-synthesises its representation in the shape of those synthetic anthropoids emitted by a thinking cloven by philosophical decision.

11. Numbers in square brackets refer to sections in *Theory of the Solitary Sailor*.

Philosophy serves only to endlessly explicate and exalt the operations and gestures of a hegemonic worldly mode of thought (philosophy shapes the world and the world shapes philosophy); it belongs to the regime of the *mixture*—the compromised order of thinking whose ultimate limit is its inability to think without the complementarity of two terms (material and ideal, mind and matter, etc.) which it separates only to articulate them (philosophical decision: the system of the one and the dyad). The history of ‘radical breaks’ in philosophy is nothing but a monotonous reiteration of this dyadic play. It is as a corrective to philosophy’s obliviousness to its own ‘lack of humanity’ that Laruelle’s non-philosophy set out to found a rigorous science ‘beginning with man and his solitude’,¹² and Grelet continues to pursue the prospect of a real-thought of the human as opposed to a philosophy.

But how can one escape from philosophy if any ‘surpassing’ of philosophy, inevitably articulating it with its outside, will just reconstitute the dyadic structure that is philosophy? Non-philosophy claims to be a mode of thought irreducible to philosophy, rooted in a real that is not already entangled in the regime of the mixed. Rather than allowing the philosophy-world to inveigle thought into starting with/in it on the assumption that thought can only proceed thus, it claims to set out from a term that is non-philosophisable, nonreciprocal and undivided, radically indifferent to the world—what Laruelle calls, among other names, ‘human’ or ‘the One’.

What non-philosophy appeals to with these names is an ante-philosophical immanent experience which it does not theoretically articulate as such, for that would already be to betray it; non-philosophy posits this radical immanence *not philosophically but axiomatically* (without assuming or declaring anything as to its content) as a ‘nonconceptual symbol’ or ‘first name’ for what inarticulately subsists all scission. This ante-philosophical datum must then be fought for by way of a positive anti-philosophy, and Laruelle’s work is nothing but the ongoing battle to insist on its non-philosophical thinkability, the task of non-philosophy being to elucidate it theoretically while defending it against its insidious harassment by the world (which amounts to the same thing).

12. F. Laruelle, *A Biography of Ordinary Man: On Authorities and Minorities*, tr. J. Hock and A. Dubilet (Cambridge: Polity, 2018), 24.

From the unilateral vantage of the ‘vision-in-One’ non-philosophy can think the philosophy-world while resisting its all-encompassing pretensions

Thought then might be occasioned by philosophy, but both are determined in the last instance by the One, which is precisely not a philosophical term, since to philosophise it would immediately be to place it in a doublet with a complementary term. From the unilateral vantage of the ‘vision-in-One’ non-philosophy can think the philosophy-world while resisting its all-encompassing pretensions, and insisting on a real anterior to its machinations. Non-philosophy thus rejoins a gnostic tradition that sees the human not as the originator, progenitor, or co-respondent of meaning and world, but as radically heterogeneous to the world, as a stranger ultimately indifferent to the multitude of opposing terms that structure it.¹³

Given this brief exposition, the question that occurs, and indeed will have occurred more than once to the seasoned reader of Laruelle, is as follows: If non-philosophy succeeds in breaking with philosophy, and therefore the world, in a way that does not simply produce more philosophy or world, what does it *do* with the extra-philosophical space of thought that it opens up? The science or ‘real-theory’ envisioned by Laruelle claims to delineate the ways in which the human-real enters into relation with this world-philosophy-structure, and indeed suffers from it, without ever being wholly determined by it. And yet although its rhetoric is one of minority, heresy, and resistance against the authorities of the world, in practice non-philosophy can seem frozen at the stage of contemplation.

Grelet’s relation to non-philosophy has been marked above all by an insistence on the subjectivation of real-theory, making of it what he calls a *theorrorism*, an attack on the world, a means of confrontation, and even a kind of ‘direct action in theory’. It was

13. ‘[R]eal theory, undetermined by philosophical operations or prejudices, is a *non-positional contemplation* (of) immediate givens or (of) unreflective transcendental experiences. These are the material of this science, which describes the content of the finite phenomenal experience of man and his relations to the grand authoritarian attributes of History, Language, Power, etc., and to their totality, which is the World, without intervening in them.’ Laruelle, *Biography of Ordinary Man*, 14.

with this in mind that, in 2002, with Ray Brassier and with the participation of Laruelle, he founded the *Organisation Non-Philosophique Internationale* (ONPhI), its aim being to finally turn non-philosophy's thought-force upon reality. A militant international, an enemy of all complacency that would insist on the *realisation*—or rather, the *realation* (exertion of the force of the real upon reality, *réellisation* rather than *réalisation*)—of the heretical break with the world that is contemplatively rehearsed in all of Laruelle's writings. Eventually resigning himself to the fact that ONPhI was unlikely to live up to these ambitions and ending his involvement in the group, Grelet has since become yet more critical of the legacy of non-philosophy, as it develops into what seems less like rebellion or attack than beatific indifference, a hermetic oeuvre increasingly centred on the grandly modest figure of Laruelle himself (and which, it must be said, has now found within the Anglophone academic industry a comfortable place quite at odds with its radical pretensions). But as Laruelle has said, 'I call a disciple the one who betrays me, and a friend the one who betrays me by remaining faithful':¹⁴ the ambitions invested in ONPhI and a fidelity to the original spirit of the non-philosophy project continue to make themselves felt in Grelet's ongoing campaign of theorrism.¹⁵

In the axiomatic positing of the One as indifferent to philosophy, thought discovers an anteriority in which to anchor a theory that can examine the great continent of philosophy unilaterally, i.e. while refusing the reciprocal determination in which philosophy seeks immediately to ensnare it. And, to take an instructive shortcut, it is in the same way that Grelet the solitary sailor sees the land from the sea and, in doing so, produces a vision of reality from or *flush with* the real (Laruelle's 'vision-in-One') rather than imaging the sea as an annex to the continent of the social, co-implicated with the requisitions of the landed.

But if *Theory of the Solitary Sailor* follows non-philosophy in developing a *theoretical fiction* from the

The solitary sailor sees the land from the sea and, in doing so, produces a vision of reality from or *flush with* the real

axiom of the anteriority of human solitude, it departs further and more radically from philosophy by insisting that the theoretical force of this fiction is inseparable from the enterprise of existentially inhabiting the hypothesis—that is, by insisting that real-theory is inseparable from *a life*.

A life flush with the sea, the all-devouring: 'Nothing can touch the brooding bitterness of its soul. Open to all and faithful to none, it exercises its fascination for the undoing of the best'.¹⁶ Free of all reference points, non-orientable, the sea remains indifferent even to the projections of globalisation. A figure of the One, 'it determines reality in the last instance'[4.3], indifferent and anterior to the land that tries to recruit it as its opposing and complementary term. More precisely, we could say that the sea is the supreme avatar, within reality, of the real, and serves—under certain conditions, as we shall see—to awaken a certain *realation*, the kind of affect that, Laruelle tells us, is the condition of the Vision-in-One: 'The foundation of a science of man entails first of all creating a *non-philosophical affect*: rendering perceptible the immediate givens, the non-hallucinatory reality, the finite transcendental experience in man.'¹⁷

Cultural Revolution and the Angel

From the beginning of what would become an increasingly dissident relationship with Laruelle,¹⁸ Grelet was deeply moved by another current. The resolute ferocity of his thinking owes a great deal to the influence of a figure he continues to laud for his antiphilosophical brilliance, political intransigence, and profound melancholy: Guy Lardreau, whose work Grelet discovered through his khâgne teacher

14. F. Laruelle, V. Citot, A. Peltier, 'Entretien avec François Laruelle', *Le Philosophaire* 43 (2015), 57–72: 71.

15. Recall that, at a early stage of non-philosophy, Derrida publicly accused Laruelle himself of being a practitioner of 'philosophical terror'! See F. Laruelle and J. Derrida, 'Controversy Over the Possibility of a Science of Philosophy', tr. R. Brassier and R. Mackay, in G. Alkon and B. Gunjevic, *The Non-Philosophy Project* (New York: Telos), 76–94: 76, 83, 85–76.

16. Conrad, 'The Mirror of the Sea', 260.

17. Laruelle, *Biography of Ordinary Man*, 10 [emphasis ours].

18. See G. Grelet, 'Un bréviaire de non-religion', in Collectif Non-Philosophie, *Discipline hérétique. Esthétique, psychanalyse, religion* (Paris: Kimé, 1998); G. Grelet, *Déclarer la gnose. D'une guerre qui revient à la culture* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2002).

Christian Jambet, with whom Lardreau co-authored the 1976 book *L'Ange* [*The Angel*].

In this work which, in its own way, also counts as a kind of antiphilosophical biography, the two thinkers agonised over the political conjuncture of the time. Amid the disarray of the French intellectual Left in the aftermath of the disgrace of actually-existing Communist projects and the disintegration of French Maoism, the only alternative to sheer capitulation to the forces of reaction, it seemed, was to seek a logic that could account for these horrific failures while preserving the hopes of revolutionary subjectivity. And yet such a prospect seemed remote to say the least.

Wrestling with Marxism, Mao-thought, and the psychoanalytic account of the subject, Lardreau turns to the parallels between Syrian-Egyptian gnosis and Maoism, finding in the early Christian heretics' negation of the world and of worldly desire a precursor or exemplar of 'cultural revolution', and generalises the latter concept with a view to understanding the stumbling blocks that precipitate it into catastrophe. He thereby expands upon the 'crude' but 'massive' problem by which he was haunted in the wake of the atrocious degradation of 'great politics' in China and Cambodia: Is the will to revolt and to remake the human, no matter how radical, always causally conditioned by the very world it seeks to overthrow, and therefore always already compromised and effectively doomed? Must every revolt be absorbed back into the apparatus of power? How does the saint, an absolute rebel from the world, become a *useful* figure instrumental to a power structure, to a church—an institution which, undoing the saint's solitary departure from the world, seeks to press a programmatic reformation upon society?¹⁹ These are questions which share a certain logic with Laruelle's account of philosophy as a series of hallucinatory heterodoxies and 'revolutions' which in fact never depart from a self-circumscribed circle of orthodoxy.

Lardreau came to occupy a unique position in relation to public intellectuals of the time, most of whom drifted into the political centre-ground and

19. G. Lardreau, 'The Problem of Great Politics in the Light of Obviously Deficient Modes of Subjectivation', tr. P. Hallward, *Angelaki* 8:2 (August 2003), 85–96: 90. This text includes an invaluable introduction by Hallward.

Rather than keeping action within safe bounds by renouncing any political enterprise to radically reform the human, one must renounce all action as doomed in advance

even became enthusiastic apologists for neoliberalism, or at least tended to renounce politics for ethics in an anxious attempt to distance themselves from the perceived taint of totalitarianism that now clung to any grand philosophical gesture. Against all good sense, he tenaciously defended the only logical alternative: rather than keeping action within safe bounds by renouncing any political enterprise to radically reform the human, one must renounce all action as doomed in advance to reproduce the structure of the world. The only real revolt is one that has no programme and proposes no intervention in the causal order of the world, but instead aspires to the status of an 'absolute repudiation' of reality.²⁰ Given the complete and deadly solidarity of every element of the world with the world as an integral whole, any relaxation in one's striving toward total refusal can only be a fatal compromise.²¹

Cultural revolution signifies a shift in the reality-profile of the human, the shadow cast in reality by generic humanity, a thoroughgoing denaturing of what goes by the name of Man. Lardreau eventually concludes that such a transformation can only be understood as being disjunct from worldly causality—which is ultimately the causality of desire. A conclusion informed by the crushing account of desire (revolutionary or otherwise) articulated by Lacan: in the struggle between master and rebel, desire, including even 'the very will, striving or desire for a world without mastery' is 'as such the domain of the master'.²² As Lacan told the rebels of '68: 'What you desire is a master, and you will get one'. Asking how the will to overthrow and reform the

20. P. Hallward, 'Reason and Revolt: Guy Lardreau's Early Voluntarism and its Limits', *Radical Philosophy* 190 (March–April 2015), 13–24: 18–19. Very little of Lardreau's work has been translated; 'Reason and Revolt' contains a list of the other sources available in English (35n1).

21. *Ibid.*, 51, 52.

22. P. Hallward, 'Fallen Angel: Guy Lardreau's Later Voluntarism', *Radical Philosophy* 203 (December 2018), 43–69: 46.

world can end up ‘taking a turn for the worse’,²³ Lardreau’s conclusion then is that the will, the very desire to act upon the world, is already coextensive and continuous with this turn for the worse.

According to Lardreau’s idiosyncratic appropriation of Kant’s ethics, the ‘autonomy of revolt’ must have a transcendental status in relation to the world²⁴ (a proposition reminiscent of the unilateral rather than causal relation between the real-human and the world in Laruelle). Revolt can only be said to be truly free, rather than a parodic hallucination, if its principle is elevated to the level of the purity of the moral Idea—i.e., subtracted from the world and dissociated from politics and history, both tainted by the duplicitous nature of a desire which (per Lacan) is always implicated in the perpetuation of existing structure. This subtractive purity in relation to the hopeless carnality of all worldly desire is excarnated by Lardreau and Jambet in the figure of the Angel.

Although continuing to draw inspiration from the idea of cultural revolution, then, Lardreau has no grounds for implying its historical necessity. Indeed, a logic of occasionality is implied here: the proletariat, for example, cannot be the motor of history, but at most the *occasion* upon which the transcendental-angelic Idea might irrupt into historical reality. At the limit, even history itself is an insignificant parade of merely apparent reversals between interchangeable masters and rebels.

The Angel’s revolt is non-dialectical and non-reciprocal; it does not enter into relation with the world

Lardreau’s saintly or angelic figure thus heralds the bad news—with a great deal of evidence on its side—that any attempt to act against the established order of the world is doomed to reproduce the cycle of orthodoxy in which ‘every actual rebellion leads to a renewal of mastery and submission’.²⁵ He thereby consigns himself to a commentary upon failed precedents, a trenchant rigour, and an anticipative vision devoid of faith or certainty: an uncompromised and absolute attack which implies a dimension of terror,

but which at the same time can only amount to a hopeless waiting for the advent of the Angel.

It is of course tempting to see this as a turn away from action to some kind of unworldly meditative spirituality, a hysterical expression of traumatised retreat after the real political horrors of the ’70s. But as appalling as its consequences may be in relation to what is generally expected of ‘political thinking’, the logico-formal force of Lardreau’s position is not easily dismissed. True rebellion, it implies, must consist in a mode of subjectivation inassimilable by the world, set against not just some particular facets of a society it seeks to reform, but against reality as such. It is only from this position that one can truly think radically (and hence non-philosophically or antiphilosophically). The Angel’s revolt is non-dialectical and non-reciprocal; it does not enter into relation with the world; like Laruelle’s human-real, it is held—axiomatically rather than with the support of philosophical argument—to subsist in some other anterior place, from whence it may (or may not) arise to puncture the monotonous administrative fabric of the world in ways that will by definition be inexplicable and unaccountable.

Theorème Against the Archons

Gnosis has been mentioned in the context of both Laruelle and Lardreau, and their respective modes of thought are both indebted to the Gnostics’ separation of divine immanence from the worldly creations of the demiurge. The heresy of Gnosticism consisted in maintaining that there is a radical non-relation between the divine spark within the human and the temporal world in which humans are placed: In so far as we are of God, we are not of this world, and indeed God itself is utterly alien. In Laruelle’s secular gnosis, the alien god is replaced by the divine spark of the human as stranger in the world, sufferer of its endless harassments. Through the continual reproduction of their spurious creations, the demonic forces—the lower powers, the Archons with the Demiurge at their head (‘the grand authoritarian attributes of History, Language, Power, etc., and [...] their totality, which is the World’)²⁶—separate humans not from a divinity of whose light they are the splintered shards, but from the real of their own generic humanity.

23. Lardreau, ‘The Problem of Great Politics’.

24. Hallward, ‘Reason and Revolt’, 13.

25. Ibid., 52.

26. Laruelle, *Biography of Ordinary Man*, 14.

Grelet does however insist on a distinction between the historical gnostic inspiration and gnosis in the general sense of a 'path' or 'way' that cannot be explicitly taught but which, beyond the letter of the text and with that letter as its occasion, may be revealed to a reader and thus initiate a subjectivation. For the anti-philosophy presented in *Theory of the Solitary Sailor*, the operations of theoretical philosophy can only be propaedeutic to this gnosis—as is the case also for Laruelle and Lardreau. Laruelle's non-philosophy claims to make use of philosophy only as a 'material'; Lardreau's intransigence to the systematising reasoning of philosophy means that philosophy can only be employed as a set of formal tools to assemble an apophatic discourse out of materials taken from other sites, pointing to something unphilosophisable—a real in the face of which language and reality can only be passive, like Laruelle's One or the Gnostic monad.

It is therefore an opening to the reception of gnosis rather than the communication of an argument to which *Theory of the Solitary Sailor* invites us, using all the resources of poetic formula, conceptual articulation, and biography. Something which may—and perhaps must—divide readers, since those endowed with a sensitivity and a distrust of the world equal to the author's will be touched by what they read here without necessarily being able to say explicitly and in full why—'clearly, if not distinctly,' as Grelet promises, 'they will have recognised themselves' (take the present text as witness). But it is precisely this non-philosophical affect, the 'awakened homesickness' of which the gnostics spoke,²⁷ that opens up the way of gnosis. The 'vision-in-One' proceeds from a sensing of the unease of the human in the world, the dawning certainty (realation) that the human does not need the world. It is the practice of sailing that, for Grelet, has brought this affect to bear in a forceful and sustained way, amplified it and provided the means to inhabit it fully. The most the author of *Theory of the Solitary Sailor* claims to do is to render us receptive to the path upon which it has set him.

Gnosis does not however imply mysticism, i.e. direct access to a pre-discursive, pre-worldly realm or revelation. It instead asks us to acknowledge or (if one prefers the register of theoretical fiction)

hypothesise or axiomatise the anteriority intimated by this affect,²⁸ and to remain with it. For thought to become flush with the non-thetic immanence of the real in flesh and blood, rather than in a form ready-converted into material for philosophy (i.e. understood or thematised as immanent) requires not an advance nor a dwelling (what gnosticism called the 'sojourn in the world' or becoming 'a son of the house')²⁹ but a *remaining* or, as Grelet will say, a *manance* [9.6]. Once again, this is a treatise on perseverance.

A subject is aleatoric and rare, has no structural or legal necessity (no worldly mandate), and is sequential

Fanaticism of the Outplace

It is at this point that we should turn to the third major theoretical influence, Alain Badiou, precisely in so far as Grelet's theoretical debt to him is complicated by Badiou's absolute resistance to the gnostic path (cognate, as Grelet has noted, with the philosopher's disinterest in melancholy).

Like Lardreau, in the '70s Badiou violently spurned the reactionary trends that called philosophy back to order, ethical modesty, and reformism. In the teachings collected in 1982's *Theory of the Subject*, he responds with icy determination and theoretical brilliance to the demands placed upon thought by the deadly misadventures of actually-existing communism. Grelet follows *Theory of the Subject* in positing that a subject is aleatoric and rare, has no structural or legal necessity (no worldly mandate), and is sequential: subjectivation depends upon a force (event) that hails from an 'outplace' of the structured situation (being), but also upon a procedure that faithfully develops this event in-situation.

For Badiou, however, the gnostic position can provide no basis for a truly consequent—that is, revolutionary—subjectivation; it is a 'fanaticism of the outplace'³⁰ because of its unilateral dualism: it 'maintains an ironclad divergence between the original purity of the divine Father and the blemishes of sex,

28. Laruelle, *Biography of Ordinary Man*, 14.

29. Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, 49–50, 55.

30. Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, 17.

27. Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, 50.

the world, and death'³¹ (Badiou could almost have been—and probably was—thinking of Lardreau and Jambet's Angel here...)³² For Badiou, whose distance from the vision-in-One may be gauged by his claim that '[s]cission [is] the only form of existence of the something in general',³³ the human may well historically be placed in a given social reality it did not constitute, but the relation between the two is constitutive, since the torsion between being and being-placed is the motor of dialectical transformation. The 'outplace', that which exceeds the situation, has a valence only in so far as it participates in the contradictions that drive history by transforming the situation, placement in which is constitutive for its very being-in-scission.

The gnostic attack on the world and its 'waiting' for the *apocatastasis*—the final restoration of all beings to the immanence of God—is irreconcilable with this dialectical understanding of subjectivation as driver of historical political sequences. The gnostic deviates precisely in so far as they deny any constitutive significance to placement-in-situation, and grant the outplace an absolute position of anteriority. The conviction that the human-real has never been in-place is as evident in Laruelle's insistence on a pre-thetic experience of the human before its insertion into the world/philosophy as it is in Lardreau's characterisation of the Angel as extra-causal.

In a minimal yet significant amendment to the daunting integrity of Lardreau's position, then, Grelet draws upon Badiou's understanding of subjectivation in order to locate a minimal point in which the rebel, in principle hostile to the reality of the world, might find *and maintain* a precarious footing in that reality without entirely relapsing into it, or, in claiming to overthrow it, enthroning himself as a new Master. But at the same time, while adopting Badiou's procedural model of subjectivation he follows Lardreau in positing an *angelic* subject that does not participate in the historical unfolding of dialectical tensions.

31. Ibid.

32. Although Badiou has continued to pay attention to his work, Lardreau did not 'make the cut' for the *Pocket Pantheon*....

33. Ibid., 10. For Badiou the One can only ever be the product of an axiomatic declaration (the 'count-as-one') with consequences for the symbolic realm of multiplicity or being; to suppose, as Laruelle does, that axiomatisation could operate outside of philosophy and contribute to a discourse on the real would be classified as a romanticising error.

And finally, in line with Laruelle's non-philosophy, he continues to insist that, unilaterally speaking, the outplace-real is not essentially intricated with the world-situation, dialectically or otherwise.

Subjectivation begins with the furnishing of conditions that allow the irruption, within the individual, of the melancholy void of the human-nothing-but-human

For Grelet as for Badiou, subjectivation involves the emergence of a secondary instance: there is the event, and then there is the fidelity-operator that sustains it in-situation.³⁴ Subjectivation 'counts' whatever manages to successfully link and sustain, piecing it together from worldly materials in the finite multiple of a place or situation, a series of points that faithfully conduct the force of the event.³⁵ The subject is a punctual, schematic inscription of the real in reality, of the outplace in place, or of the unworldly event in the world. Following Laruelle and Lardreau, however, Grelet pledges fidelity not to a historical truth but to the simplicity of the human-nothing-but-human in its solitude; for him the sequence of subjectivation begins with the furnishing of conditions that allow the irruption, within the individual, of the melancholy void of the human-nothing-but-human in all its brutal subtraction from the worldly; it is then sustained through the construction of a minimal existential apparatus to support this void in-world: an *institution* keeps it at a distance from the world, and a *place* serves it as a constant; the function of this subjective sequence is not to act upon the world, to transform the situation, or to make history but to persevere, to remain alive in the closest possible proximity to the vast melancholy of the real. Badiou's dictum 'we must keep steadily out of place'³⁶ takes on a very different complexion here.

The Angel's Wing

Requiring a 'mixture of recklessness and nerve' (Jean-Pierre Abraham), the practice of solo sailing

34. Badiou, *Being and Event*, tr. A. Toscano (London and New York: Continuum, 2009), 393.

35. Ibid.

36. Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, 21.

offers a precise and concrete diagram of such a transcendental razor's edge, and therefore provides the requisite initiation for this subjectivation and this gnosis. It places the sailor, entirely self-dependent yet fused with their vessel, in continuity with the all-devouring, with the sea qua reality closest to the merciless unilaterality of the 'hardest and blindest law' [5.15]. But it extracts from this agonistic encounter a graceful motion—a method, with 'incessant adjustments,' of keeping 'the right distance' [16.5]. The sail provides just enough to live, inserting the body into the all-devouring abyss in order to draw some power from it, interrupting the elements enough to extract the possibility of perseverance. A screen between real and reality, it at once prevents the refusal of world from consigning one to the void, and prevents refusal of the void from consigning one to worldliness. An angelic wing that does not grip reality, in its non-interventionary, non-extractive relation to the world it expresses a radical non-manipulative cybernetics at odds with and anterior to the prosthetic impulse that makes everything an extension of man's will (an impulse of which philosophy too is an expression). The force sensed by the sailor in a taut mainsheet is that of the finite catching the infinite with the greatest of tact, with minimal compromise, under 'maximal constraint' [5.16], 'to obtain some traction' [5.6].

To entirely withdraw from reality would be a death sentence, and yet (following Lardreau) any compromise is complete compromise. 'Just enough to live', then [5.6]: the sail allows the real to insert itself into reality just enough to maintain the motion that repeats circumscription, but no more.

The Anti-Social Institution

Such a concern with 'render[ing] the rebellion against the world liveable' [11.3] runs contrary to both the idealess pragmatism of compromise and the heroism of self-abolition. This indeed seems to be the substance of the break between 'Theororism 1' and 'Theororism 2' [14.16], at the moment when Grelet took to the sea permanently: as he undergoes his own initiation without knowing what is to come, the idea of a straight line in one direction with no turning back, a deceptively easy and ultimately potentially suicidal way to break out of the circles of the world, gives way to the more complex model recorded in *Theory of the Solitary Sailor*, instructed by close

attention to every aspect of the practice of sailing, as canonical exigencies are confronted with the trials of practice.

Grelet records the stages of this initiation clearly, producing extremely precise concepts for the discoveries made along the path of the sea he opened up for himself, a path which at every moment involves real perils—not only of physical danger but also of moral despair. In evacuating the world, one leaves in its place a void—the melancholy worldless and wordless void which, according to Grelet, simply is the human-nothing-but-human. The emptying out constitutive of an angelic life (*vidange/vie d'ange*), the purifying voiding of self (*kenosis*) experienced by the ascetics and which the solitary sailor encounters at sea, in itself offers only extinction. If not relapse: one may leave the world and yet the world may reenter from within. As has been told by numerous protagonists pitted against society by intent or accident, in rebuilding the subject from castaway debris one ends up having travelled nowhere (Robinson Crusoe, equipping himself with all the administrative tools to rebuild his former life). The subjective evacuation that befalls the human alone in an inhospitable, unworldly environment initiates the process, but, if one is not to cede to animality or suicide, something else must be present to subjectivate on or with. Even in the absence of fellow humans, one never subjectivates alone.³⁷

The institution is that which at once gives the void of melancholy a support, makes it liveable, and provides the means to protect it from the world

Real-thought proceeds from a subjectivating practice (for Grelet, sailing) and requires an institution (his boat, *Théorème*). The institution is that which at once gives the void of melancholy a support, makes it liveable, and provides the means to protect it from the world. The institution then is the mark, clone, or reality-support of the unworldly real, a minimal point which, along with the ritual motions that

37. One may subjectivate on an environment and realise oneself in it as in a mirror: as Tournier's Robinson says and Ballard's concrete islander echoes, 'I am the island' (M. Tournier, *Friday, or the Other Island* [1967], tr. N. Denny and F. Botelho [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997]; J.G. Ballard, *Concrete Island* [1973] [London: Vintage, 1994], 71).

keep it afloat, prevents rebellion from being a brief flash soon extinguished. For, as recounted vividly by Grelet, unless *regularised* by means of such an institution, the silence attained upon departure from the world will replenish itself with the phantasmatic babbling of an inner world the sailor has inadvertently lugged aboard [2.11].

The institution is thus a mediator between what we might call *administration*—the machinery and machinations of the world in subjection to which the real of the human becomes refracted into a representation, a set of administrative coordinates whether social, governmental, biopolitical or philosophical—and the void, total desubjectivation, the emptying out of the mind and the evacuation of the world, fatal deliverance to the infinite melancholy of the real.

Grelet's suggestion is that, even if subjectivation is an aleatory event, to a certain extent—precisely the extent of the institution—its grace can be regularised. To put it another way, the institution is the sail, the infrathin foil inserted into reality in order to afford the melancholy void a stable support, albeit a floating one in constant motion.

The Rock of Brittany

One might logically suppose then that the boat offers the minimal unrooted point from which the formula of freedom from the world can be spoken and lived. But this floating institution itself is not adequate; it must be supplemented by the constancy of a *place*.

Here we encounter a most striking articulation of the transcendental and the empirical. Perhaps one of the strangest aspects of *Theory of the Solitary Sailor*, upon a first reading, is the amount of space Grelet dedicates, not just to the theoretical necessity of a constant in which a radical stance can be rooted, but to the actuality of Brittany, the coast around whose shores *Théorème* largely moves. Grelet's geopoetical figure is not that of the island or the desert, nor a metaphysical abstraction of the open or the outside: it is, more concretely (or rather, *granitically*) Brittany as *finisterre*—the land where land ends. The finisterre, the third term or constant that enables the formula of human and void or finite and infinite to hold, is *Theory of the Solitary Sailor's*

key concept and most original contribution, and Grelet insists upon its inseparability of its discovery from his personal rediscovery of Brittany.

The philosopher schooled in 'nomadising' thought may be tempted to read this critically as an appeal to comfort, regional identity, or being 'at home'. And it is true that, in the choice of Brittany, Grelet attends to his individual intuitions and does not shy away from the contingencies of his empirical (worldly) biography; and yet he simultaneously struggles against the snares of nativity, the 'sense of belonging' and the mystique of 'place' instrumentalised by tourism and regional politics alike.

'Brittany' is transformed into the name of an anti-philosophical discovery

Grelet strives to excavate Brittany from its political forgetting, to recover or invent an anti-political Brittany that takes history 'against the grain', and whose heading or cape³⁸ indicates an anteriority, a precession which is that of a *remanence* (a non-chronological precedence). Anti-worldly, this Brittany counteractualised, reduced to its radicality, is also ante-worldly, marking the persistence of a non-chronological antecedence that traverses the whole text—ultimately, the anteriority of the human over the world that harasses it. 'Brittany' is transformed into the name of an anti-philosophical *discovery*, a shimmering icon in-between absolute concreteness and 'transcendental experience'.

Although inseparable from its granite reality, the real Brittany exists in the world only as a compromised admixture which one must extract and make living through one's own solitude. In the absence of the other who would provide the necessary foil for subjectivation to take place, this 'indestructible rock', 'a granite place of resistance' (Anatole Le Braz, Saint-Pol-Roux) and even a site of prehistoric cultural revolution (as Grelet conjectures, on the basis of Yannick Lecerf's synthesis of recent archaeological discoveries), becomes a constitutive part of the apparatus of subjectivation—but not a subjectivation that is political, partisan, that appeals to history or to an independence that would be as political as its

38. On 'cap' as heading, orientation, cape, headland, see J. Derrida, *L'autre cap; suivi de La démocratie ajournée* (Paris: Minuit, 1991).

The Rimbaudian reciprocity of formula and place becomes a prescription for perseverance, the place giving the formula its constant

subjugation by the state. Brittany is real, Grelet insists: its geological unity precedes any political unity it may or may not claim; only in its materiality does it become the privileged place of an angelism or a gnosis [11.3].

The institution counters the fatality of the void by providing it with a support, and yet, floating and in-constant as it is, it can provide at best somewhere for the human to die with dignity, decoupled from the world. And indeed, the purest gesture of rebellion, the abolition of everything including oneself, would be satisfied with this, having no need of the place, the materiality of which would only weigh it down unduly. It is upon entering into the problematic of *perseverance* that one has need of the place as *minimal constant* that keeps one in minimal contact with the world. The Rimbaudian reciprocity of formula and place becomes a prescription for perseverance, the place giving the formula its constant [7.3]. The finisterre—an outcrop of reality whose sole heading is into the real—offers a solution to the problem (Lardreau's problem) of a *constant of rebellion*. In this finisterre, an analogue or clone of the human-real within the provinces of reality, Grelet finds a place where one can be *in* the world without being *of* it. It is indeed a land whose people have often been described as such, whether romantically or disparagingly.

In his surprising insistence on institution and place, on circumscription, regularisation, and constancy, rather than an antihumanist imaginary that insists upon a homelessness assimilated all too easily into bourgeois global 'nomadism', what Grelet is seeking is a human solitude equipped with sufficient regularity and constancy to renounce domesticity and domestication without falling prey to cosmopolitanism. All of these, what might despite their apparent abstraction be called *practical* considerations—the precautions of speech, the care with writing, the concern for viability, the need for an institution, a place—constitute those complex detours on the way to simplicity, unavoidable complications

encountered in the attempt to *live*—to *really* be subjectivated by—a theoretical proposition. In addition to the brutal alternative between compromise and the uncompromising, then, Grelet adds another, between compromise and the liveable, demarcating the two with care. All of this is the inevitable result of the axiom: *no theory without subjectivation, no subjectivation without action*.

Rebellious rage leads back to the world or into the abyss (in either case, 'nothing will have taken place but the place'). The granite of Brittany is for Grelet the anti-philosopher's stone—the *manance*—that will enable rebellion to stand, to be more than a brief and ineffective flurry of rage or resignation (the example of Vincent la Soudière, with 'no place from which to speak' [15.5], a force without place).

It is as if we have made our way around a mobius band: at first assuming that the boat qua institution and circumscription must gravitate around the coast of Brittany in order to provide a minimal sense of rootedness, we understand that the finisterre is a generic Brittany, and the boat itself is a mobile finisterre: in this way, everything that offers itself, aleatorily, to be encountered in Brittany is continually provoked, in constant motion, circumscribed, repeated and displaced, in the boat that circumnavigates its shores.

Contingencies of Gnosis

And yet what Grelet does seem to suggest (and it is an important supplement to the theme of escape, a question which, once rendered philosophisable, becomes dangerously abstract, decoupled from the labour of subjectivation and floating free of land and sea) is that there are places on the planet where the seam of the real runs nearer the surface and is less comprehensively buried by worldly administration—places where 'transcendental experience' [8.16] may be sought, albeit not guaranteed. What is sought in the place, in radical rootedness, is a point of leverage, the solidity of a *remainder in the world of what was before the world*—a point of real amidst the degradations of reality. The most one can say of a place, perhaps, is that it is conducive to the '*provocation of the contingency of gnosis*' [15.3]. A place of encounters, of panic and jubilation [13.3], infinite, joyful, at once active and passive, encounters of love and which are even sexual [12.10]. The provocation

of such encounters with the contingency of a fin-isterre—a point of land stretching out into the sea, or more generically any point not entirely engulfed by the worldly, resistant to becoming encrusted by its administrative regime—are the beacons that Grelet's gnosis pursues. Discovering 'the way' then certainly depends upon disciplined thought, but also upon a sensitivity to such encounters, and upon attending to intuitions relating to one's own life course. There is no escaping the biographical, but one seeks within it some discovery that will lead out of the administered subject, opening the way to a new mode of subjectivation.

Of course, nothing could be more absurd than the idea of acolytes flocking to Brittany to join the path opened up by Grelet. It is for every solitary to invent their institution and find their rock, perhaps by chance, but a chance that can be provoked by developing the reckless determination to follow it when it comes. Perhaps the first step of gnosis involves nurturing the capacity for a *decision to depart*—Jean-Pierre Abraham and his abrupt departure for the inhospitable Armen lighthouse: 'all of a sudden I decided I would go there. I had truly found my place, I believe that this is what one must search for' [15.4].

Grelet certainly does not seek followers; what he gives us is the rig, the theoretical equipment, the formal necessities, the canon—along with the organon of his own subjectivation. More importantly, what he takes away are our excuses to turn a blind eye to our compromises with the world. In the pitiless words of Lardreau: 'the greatest virtue, that of the *Clementine Homilies*, is simplicity, the straightforwardness that characterizes a soul that is purified of this world and belongs to the other world, as the basic vice, so common and alas!, the very essence of ordinary, petty man, is duplicity, hesitation'.³⁹ Eschewing all duplicity and hesitation, *Theory of the Solitary Sailor* indicates the way toward another life which, whether or not they take its path, will continue to haunt the reader sensitive enough to grasp for themselves its implications and its real possibility: the possibility of assembling a minimal apparatus that allows the real to touch you, if only for the odd scintillating moment when the sail catches the

Eschewing all duplicity and hesitation, *Theory of the Solitary Sailor* indicates the way toward another life

wind and the sailor, married to their vessel, becomes flush with the real and is filled with the light of the void. As Grelet writes in one of several precious moments of crystalline beauty from which the whole of his painstaking endeavour is suspended, 'there is joy, there are rushes of joy each of which is a traversal of melancholy' [16.9n]. A living departure from this world can be real, is the real.

Theory of the Solitary Sailor is a book that could very well not have been written, yet it is one of the few that we need in a time Rousseau could have been addressing directly when we wrote: 'I have met many men who were more learned in their philosophizing, but their philosophy remained as it were external to them. [...] Several of them merely desired to write a book, any book, so long as it was successful'.⁴⁰ *Theory of the Solitary Sailor*, assuredly, is not 'any book'. And 'success' for a sailor, as Conrad tells us, means nothing other than '[t]o forget one's self, to surrender all personal feeling in the service of that fine art'.⁴¹ The desires of the author of this selfless autobiography are limited to having said enough to be able to continue to hold his silence and wait—and continue to sail.

It is a book to be loved for its intimacy with melancholy and pain—'melancholy without cause and without limit, and the pain of being in the world' [20.4], and with disquiet ('I had always felt ill at ease, surplus to requirements, out of place' [2.3]), for its unrelenting instinct for revolt, and for its success in holding a true heading, its steadfast refusal either to disembark for the familiar shores of a miserable ease or to yield to the chicanery of the philosopher's elision of the simple. For all its formulaic austerity, it is a declaration of vehement love for the precarious little that remains of the human in the world. For the reader 'impatient to find the place and the formula', it offers a gnosis without salvation and a fierce call to arms. Is it a book of philosophy? It is an anti-biography, and '[a]nti-biography, the real beating heart

39. Lardreau, 'Lin Piao as Will and Representation', tr. B.R. Rubin, *Chicago Review* 32:3 (Winter 1981), 48–57: 52.

40. Rousseau, *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, 48–49.

41. Conrad, 'The Mirror of the Sea', 160.

of anti-philosophy, is the enunciation of a human solitude’.

May 2022,
Plymouth, England,
‘...where men and sea interpenetrate,
so to speak—the sea entering in to the life of
most men, and the men knowing something or
everything about the sea’.⁴²

42. J. Conrad, ‘Youth’, in *Youth and The End of the Tether* (London: Penguin, 1975),