

Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, 1940–2007

Recent commemorative events in Paris and New York have given some measure of the immense esteem, even devotion, accorded to Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe from a host of individuals from the arts and various intellectual communities. It has far surpassed what might be surmised from any record of the events and accomplishments that marked his public life over the past forty years.

To be sure, the turning points and the achievements are eminently noteworthy. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe stepped onto the philosophical scene in France not long before the decisive disruption of academic and political life that occurred in the spring of 1968. He experienced the events of this spring and their aftermath from a site of collaborative philosophical activism he had begun to create with his colleague Jean-Luc Nancy in Strasbourg at the invitation of Lucien Braun. Nourished in Situationist thinking and the work of groups such as *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, he found in the events of that spring a kind of unfailing source for a political passion that he directed towards a philosophical critique of the foundations of the political order. This critique was pursued in a range of venues, including his seminars with Jean-Luc Nancy and the research initiative they pursued in the early 1980s under the title *Centre de recherches philosophiques sur le politique*. The acuity of his thinking was never without the tinge of this passion.



In his earlier years, Lacoue-Labarthe worked in an intellectual context that was itself revolutionary in character. Indeed, it is hard to think of the momentum of what became known as the post-structuralist movement in other terms. The genealogy of the particular line of aesthetic and political thinking from which he stemmed, a line that included figures such as Nietzsche and Bataille, and that was presented to this young intellectual from the French south-west by powerful teachers such as Gérard Granel, has yet to be fully written. An intellectual biography will have to inform us of the role of Jean-Marie Pontévia in shaping Lacoue-Labarthe's aesthetic thinking in his early years. Granel, for his part,

undoubtedly played a special role in preparing Lacoue-Labarthe to recognize how the *general* critique undertaken in post-structuralism relied for its possibility on the Heideggerian deconstruction of Western philosophy, and how its Derridean formulation opened the French tradition he had inherited to new critical articulations. Blanchot, we may presume, now became especially important for someone who had eschewed the Sartrean reception of Marxism.

With a profound grasp of the manner in which Heidegger had opened the philosophical tradition to a thought of its end, Lacoue-Labarthe identified a problematic that allowed him to pursue the deconstruction of the metaphysics of subjectivity in a markedly singular way. He was not the only thinker to grasp the import of the question of mimesis in this period (Luce Irigaray made important contributions, as did Derrida). But he developed the question with characteristic care through a penetrating and intense confrontation with thinkers such as Nietzsche, Freud, Reik and Heidegger himself, and carried it into a broader reflection on the constitution of the political order and its modern fate. This trajectory resulted in works such as *Le Sujet de la philosophie* (1979) and *l'Imitation des modernes* (1986), as well as the seminal essay 'Typographie'. It also prepared the critically important work addressed to the question of Heidegger's

engagement with National Socialism that formed the basis of *La Fiction du politique* (1987; trans. Heidegger, *Art and Politics*, 1990), submitted for a Docteur d'État before a jury that included George Steiner, Jean-François Lyotard, Lucien Braun and Jacques Derrida. The confrontation with Heidegger was inseparable from an effort to disengage Hölderlin from what Lacoue-Labarthe understood as a Heideggerian mythologization, and from an engagement with Celan's own struggle with the Heideggerian legacy (most crucially in its silence on the question of extermination).

Other commentators will place their accents differently, and intellectual biographies will provide fuller accounts of Lacoue-Labarthe's work of the late 1980s and 1990s, which saw a development of his engagement with dramaturgy (undertaken initially in the late 1970s with a staging of his translation of Hölderlin's translation of *Oedipus*) and further critical work on Heidegger and Hölderlin, as well as an important book on Wagner (*Musica Ficta*, 1991). But however precise the shape of this intellectual history, it will never suffice to account for the ground of the esteem to which the recent commemorative events have borne witness.

Two points should be made. First, Lacoue-Labarthe's engagements were never undertaken alone, as was immediately visible in his remarkable collaboration with Jean-Luc Nancy and the community they formed around them. The important work on German Romanticism they presented in *l'Absolu littéraire* (1978; drafted at astonishing speed in a single summer) testifies not only to their philosophical and literary commitments, but also to their engagements in relation to the question of community. Lacoue-Labarthe's propensity to share personal and philosophical paths was not, however, the reflection of an impetus to *gather*. Quite the contrary. He pursued a singular trajectory and was in many respects an intensely solitary individual – only a few could claim to have really known him. (It is reported that even Blanchot complained in this regard!) Perhaps only Claire Nancy (in addition to Jean-Luc) joined him in true intimacy. But, in a remarkable manner, his discretion also presented a profound receptivity and hospitality.

Any number of personal traits relayed this invitation: a fragility, something infantile, something that challenged. Always warmth. These personal qualities need not be explored here. But they had a profound effect on the *scene* that Lacoue-Labarthe helped constitute in Strasbourg. His intellectual bearing set a tone that helped make the constellation of intellectual and artistic life there in the 1970s and early 1980s the site of a unique event. No one who experienced that scene, that *idyll*, as Rodolphe Burger has described it, could come away untouched. Lacoue-Labarthe did not carry that event, and he was never its focal point. But, in a captivating manner, he *allowed* it with his person. A rhythm formed in his presence.

A second point also relates to the theme of accompaniment, though it is infinitely harder to evoke. All who encountered Lacoue-Labarthe sensed that he was accompanied by something he desperately sought to bring into the scene of his writing and thinking. In brief, an account of Lacoue-Labarthe's life cannot avoid the question of *literature*, as he experienced it and as he brought it to expression in the late volume *Phrase* (2000). 'Literature' named for him an impossible effort to bring to language something at the margins of language to which only a kind of renunciation and forgetting could begin to be faithful. It was indissociable from an experience of *desistance*, as Derrida once named it, and which Lacoue-Labarthe could not separate from his own dying. The text of *Phrase* is difficult to read for those who saw Lacoue-Labarthe's decline in the last fifteen years of his life, since it speaks to a spreading abandon even in its sober and graceful prose. But it gives us something like the self-dissimulating truth of that decline, as Lacoue-Labarthe knew it. Most importantly, perhaps, it helps us to hear the barely audible suspended refrains that haunt the syntax of this meticulous writer. *Phrase* tells us that we must attend again to the literature he was writing on the scene he shared with so many others – and to an entirely different history.

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