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Rejecting Failure, Rethinking Human Agency

Before considering the idea of failure in art, it would be well to focus on the conditions of possibility of failure. What are the implicit presuppositions we subscribe to when we speak of failure, and what would happen if we suddenly decided to reject them?

At the outset, failure implies a *discrepancy* between the effect aimed at and the one obtained; it only appears as such in the perspective of a desire, an attempt or a hope that is thwarted. More fundamentally, it presupposes the *possibility* that the course of events, instead of leading to a setback, could have taken another turn and led to the result desired: I do not speak of failure when I regret not being able to walk on water. The fact that failure is generally painful is not just because I think that I "could have" succeeded, but also because I consider myself, at least partially, as *responsible* for my nonsuccess. At a critical moment in the past, I made a wrong calculation, a wrong choice: I could have, or "should have" acted differently, and it is this decision, made at the critical moment, that I subsequently make responsible for the failure. In other words, the notion of failure participates in a *metaphysics of free will*.

What would happen, therefore, if we attempted to re-think the notion of failure starting from a deterministic philosophy that rejects the most fundamental presuppositions on which it is based (the possibility of an unrealised course of events, responsibility, free will)? To explore this deterministic alternative, we shall here take as our guide the thought of Spinoza as developed not only in his *Ethics* but also in the entire tradition called by way of simplification "spinozist", reaching from the 18th century to our own, from Diderot to Toni Negri and Laurent Bove, via Nietzsche, Gabriel Tarde, Gilbert Simondon, Gilles Deleuze or Etienne Balibar. After a discussion of some general conditions on the status of willing and acting in this tradition, we shall conclude by situating the act of artistic production in a realm Beyond Success and Failure.

So let us admit that there is no effect without a cause, and that human behaviours, like all other natural events, are both causes of later events and effects of previous ones, and that our "wills", our "decisions" and our "choices" are determined to be what they are by a necessary concatenation of causes and effects that we cannot be held responsible for. To say it with Diderot: "An animal that would act without a motive can no more be conceived of than an action without a cause. And every motive, be it exterior or interior, is independent of ourselves. A free human being is an abstract being, a piece of machinery isolated from its machine. Release him from this state of abstraction in the world and his alleged freedom vanishes."¹

¹ Denis Diderot, *Observations sur Hemsterhuis* (1774), in *Oeuvres*, tome I, *Philosophie*, Paris, Laffont, "Bouquins", 1994, p. 721.

Contrary to what common prejudice claims, such an approach is in no way incompatible with an *ethical* reflection and capacity of judgement: the distinction remains intact between the *good* (what nourishes our life and strength, both individual and collective) and the *bad* (what threatens our survival or diminishes our power to act). From this standpoint, the spinozist tradition would seem at first glance to condemn us to failure. Indeed, one axiom of Part 4 of Spinoza's Ethics specifies that "for everthing that is given, there is something stronger by which the first thing can be destroyed." In other words, by the very fact that we exist, we are fatally condemned to that final failure which is death (destruction). Worse still, by the fact that we are a part of Nature (and not incorporeal angels), we are all subject to a powerlessness (*impotentia*) that consists in "being determined by exterior things to act in a manner imposed by the general disposition of things." We are destined to be tossed about by our passions, our emotions and our inadequate reactions to situations that we shall never be capable of understanding or mastering entirely. Now if we were to assimilate the spinozist tradition to materialistic thinking, which denies the immortality of the soul and refuses our human person any form of survival after the death of the body, we could well look on Spinoza as a thinker who has raised failure to the status of an ineluctable and hopeless system.

This of course is not the case. By rejecting the category of free will, the spinozist tradition at one stroke does away with the notions of merit, responsibility, guilt and sin; in short, all the concepts that give failure its specific sadness. Again, let us recall the presuppositions of failure enumerated above. In spite of not being free, in the sense of "unconditioned", the will has nonetheless a psychological reality that cannot be denied. Man defines himself precisely by his appetite, his desire, by the goal he is striving for in order to persevere in his being – what Spinoza evokes by the term "conatus".

The *discrepancy* between what I would like to obtain (or be) and what I find myself actually attaining is in no way ignored or denied. We spend (nearly) all our lives desiring more than we have, and tending towards that which we are not (yet). There is nothing wrong in this, because this effort is the movement of life itself, the very energy of reality. What changes when we swing over to a spinozist vision is the entire *encumbrance of guilt feelings* surrounding this discrepancy. The existence of these singular things that we are is certainly subjected to *destruction* (death), *privation* (the lack of the things necessary to our health: food, drink, warmth, air) as well as *frustration* (generated by the discrepancy between our subjective expectations and what reality can provide in order to satisfy them). Destruction, privation and frustration, however, are now freed from the regret, bitterness and reproach that haunt the notion of failure. Death is an unpleasant encounter, not a final botch; an asthmatic does not blame his lungs for depriving him of air; someone who dreams of riding on a flying carpet does not, as a rule, blame the carpets for remaining firmly on the floor when he awakes. Only a very few of us would classify the force of gravity that binds us to the ground under the category of "failure". The spinozist tradition makes us recognize that all our acts (successful or not) are the effects of a causality that is just as necessary, and just as beyond good and evil, as the universal law of gravity is.

Instead of setting himself up as the judge of virtues and faults, the "fatalist" (to recall the terminology used by Diderot and Holbach) focuses his entire energy on *understanding effects by their causes*. What has caused the scarcity of goods I suffer from in being deprived, and how can I counteract or circumvent it? What is it within me that has produced the subjective expectation whose projection onto the world gives me the experience of frustration, and to what extent do I gain in embracing it or, on the contrary, renouncing it? In the spirit of the fatalist, my decisions, desires, preferences and choices no longer emanate from an interior source that is within me (free will) and from which my merit or my fault is thought to result (responsibility). They concern *conditionings* that are certainly extremely complex, but at least partly *knowable* and – to the extent that an understanding of the causes can lead to mastering their effects – *modifiable*.

What therefore is *an action*, within this conceptual framework? In a remarkable convergence with Far Eastern philosophy, to act first appears as a reality that always presents an inseparable double-sidedness of activity and passivity: it is only to the extent that I am caused to act that I myself can become the cause of an action; my *power to affect* something else is thus necessarily proportional to my *power to be affected* by something else.

A vision of action such as this has at least three consequences in direct relation with our purpose, since it leads to a redefinition of the notion of failure. Firstly, it liberates human action from all the narcissistic, moralizing and guilt-causing investments that otherwise encumber it: because everything I do in the last analysis always has its source, its reason for being and its cause outside of me, I have no vainglory, pride, shame or regret to derive from it. This of course does not mean that everything is indifferent, for my acts always have consequences that can be advantageous, pleasant, painful or deadly for me. But by deflating my imaginary self which supports claims about the merit or demerit of my actions, this approach makes my person simply *the site of an interface* between my inner and the outer world. Whether the result of my act conforms to my expectation or frustrates it, the success or failure will no more be "mine" than the irrigation of a dry plain or the destruction of a village by flooding is to be attributed to the moral credit or discredit of the river whose level has risen over its banks.

Secondly, by assigning a central role to the notion of *power*, this conception reconfigures the discrepancy between the possible and the achieved that we have seen to lie at the heart of the notion of failure, and it does so within a deterministic framework that makes it particularly rich and complex. To proceed (perhaps too) rapidly, we shall start with the question that Deleuze places at the centre of his reading of Spinoza: *What can a body do?* At every given moment, there are things that my body is capable of doing according to the solicitations of the moment (bowling in a game of pétanque, speaking French); there are other things it is not capable of in its present state (running 100 metres in less than 13 seconds, speaking Chinese); finally, there are things that no human body seems to be able to do under any circumstance (functioning without oxygen, walking on water). If at every instant my act exactly reflects my current power of acting, when the time-factor is re-introduced, one can observe a discrepancy between that which I do and that which a human body is

capable of: I could become a better athlete (if I practised more) or I could speak Chinese (if I took the time to learn it).

Now, we must realize that most of our acts remain largely on this side of the extremes of our power of acting. This discrepancy most often takes the form of a gap between the possible as such (the limits of my corporeal or intellectual potential) and that which my environment has permitted me to accomplish within the range of this particular possibility. Here again, however, it would be erroneous to speak directly in terms of *personal failure*: failures, no more than successes, are never simply "mine", but result from *a concretion of interfaces*. It is only insofar as I contribute to forming my own environment and that of others, i.e. insofar as I contribute to conditioning that which will condition acts to come, that my act can come under the category of failure. But from then on, it is a failure that is *always collective*.

Thirdly, and this finally leads us closest to the question of failure in the domain of art, this conception of human action places the virtue of *receptivity* in the foreground. The necessary coincidence between the power to affect something else and the power to be affected can, in fact, be expressed as follows: the more powerful I am, the more sensitive I am – and reciprocally, the more sensitive I am, the more powerful I am. Those who imagine force as being "brute" do not understand the essence of true power, which is suppleness, flexibility and attention to the subtlest signs indicating that a change is about to take place.

Now it becomes clearer how the spinozist conception of human agency can concern in the most direct manner the type of practices that we qualify in the 21st century as "artistic". Spinoza himself centred his description of human agency on the category of reason (*ratio, intellectus*), conceived as understanding things by their causes; humans individually as well as collectively will only achieve freedom to the extent that their acts are directed by an adequate knowledge of what causes the events on which their happiness or unhappiness depends. The receptivity in question here is that of the intellect, which must make itself as attentive as possible to the singular details of every situation, in order ceaselessly to refine its understanding of the hypercomplex causal relations that surround, constitute and condition us.

Even though none of Spinoza's texts devotes prolonged attention to aesthetic or artistic matters (two anachronistic terms in his time), his thought is nevertheless rich in implications that came to unfold throughout the writings of later authors (such as Diderot, Tarde or Deleuze). Where in fact could a more emblematic illustration of the double-sidedness of spinozist agency be found than in the production of art? What do the classic theories of inspiration tell us, if not that the more the poet (etymologically "the maker") is receptive to the almost imperceptible suggestions murmured to him by his Muse, the more creative, the more active and the more powerful he is? The whole adventure of modern art constitutes an enormous enterprise of experimentation, exploration, reconnaissance and expansion of our sensitivity, our power to feel (aisthesis), and our power to be affected.²

² On this definition of the functioning of (modern) art, I rely mostly on the theories developed by Victor Grauer, in particular in "Modernism/Postmodernism/Neomodernism", *Downtown Review*, Vol. 3 Nos. 1&2, Fall/ Winter/ Spring 1981/82, and "Toward a Unified Theory of the Arts", *Semiotica* (vol. 94-3/4), 1993, pp. 233-252. Both articles, with many more equally interesting ones, are

It is under this aspect, among others, that we must view the slow artistic education of the masses in the course of the 20th century (the passage of revolutionaries like the Impressionists, the composer of the *Rite of Spring* or Verlaine, at the level of the classics). With the development of what Michel Foucault calls biopower, modern art – at the same time it contested the dominant perceptions and ideologies of the time – has been a massive *producer of affectivity*. The penetration of paintings yesterday considered scandalous into the most official museums, the recycling of practices proper to experimental cinema in TV commercials and the degeneration of all sorts of musical punkery to upholstered, greying conformisms, are no more to be perceived as successes than as failures, but rather as the slow biopolitical expansion of our power to be affected, an expansion that carries with it an increase in our power to affect someone else. This is the source of the aftertaste of betrayal that accompanies every commercial "success": at the same time as the artist "succeeds" in opening up paths of a new sensitivity enriching our experience of the world, he permits, by that very fact, all the vectors of control and alienation to rush into these new channels in order to affect us more powerfully. To put it in yet other words: an artist who "succeeds" certainly contributes to expanding the field of our possible experiences, but he cannot do so without simultaneously exposing us to all the influences, or all the conditionings which themselves become also possible thanks to the exacerbation of our sensitivity.

If every success of the modernist artist is condemned to betray the liberating project of modern art, in the sense that the reverse side of every emancipation carries with it new servitudes, would it not be true to say, inversely, that every commercial "failure" is a victory of resistance to the capacities of recuperation proper to biopolitics? If we desire to re-configure the particular domain of art in order to make it productive instead of guilt-bringing, this question must be answered in three distinct stages.

We must begin by recognizing, of course, that most often commercial nonsuccess entails *privation* (of the resources necessary for the development of creative projects) — with, at the limit, the pure and simple *destruction* of the artist as an artist (the discontinuation of his/her production of new works). The absence of a positive response on the part of the public and the market does, therefore, have drastic and undeniable consequences.

But we must make an immediate and clear distinction between commercial nonsuccess and *ineffectiveness*. And to do this, it would be well to call on the transindividual approach (Simondon) that invites us to reconsider what we take a priori for *individuals* (objectively delimited: a woman, this blade of grass, that star) both as *collectives* (molecules) and as *members* of individuals of a higher degree of composition (a society, a meadow, a galaxy). It then becomes clear that every act is a bearer of *infinitesimal* effects (Leibniz, Tarde), and that it is only to the extent that these effects do not attain certain critical masses that we identify them, for lack of attention, as "failures". Every artistic production transforms its author; most artists manage to show their work to someone, if only their friends and relatives. This slow and underground *effectiveness of the infinitesimal* escapes our notice until the moment

when – according to the chaotic logic of the beating of a butterfly's wings – the accumulation of molecular inflections (Deleuze) exceeds these critical thresholds, which finally burst forth in the full day of a revolution (aesthetic, epistemological or political). It is therefore only by far-sightedness that the effectiveness proper to underground art can be assimilated to a failure.

All the same, between the privation of financial resources and the progressive concretion of the infinitesimal – and this will be our last point – it is necessary to recognize a level of *social regulation* where the notion of failure can take on an unambiguously urgent pertinence. Economists for example speak of *market failure* when the spontaneous interplay of supply and demand generates a price that does not accurately reflect the sum of the benefits or nuisances attached to the product in question. Now the production and diffusion of this increase in sensitivity that makes the social value of the artistic experience cannot be confided to the circular and short-sighted logic of the market, which in this case is bound to mutilate our collective power of invention. If love, according to Lacan, consists in giving what one does not have, (modern) art is essentially a Supply destined to exceed any predefined Demand. By submitting artistic innovation to the rules of a market where the consumers' preferences are more and more explicitly organized by the conditionings of fashions and the manipulations of advertising, our society imposes the slowness proper to the ways of diffusion of the underground on the development of its sensitivity.

This could well be the only instance where one can legitimately speak of artistic failure. As we stated, the only failure is a collective one. Now we can now narrow it down further: *all failures are failures in modes of regulation*. Among other sociopolitical damages, the naïvety of the prevailing talk about the free will of the consumer/elector has the consequence of legitimating and perpetuating a mode of regulation that prevents our power to be affected (i.e., our aesthetic and ethical sensitivity) from keeping up with the pace of development of our power to affect (i.e., our technology). As we become more powerful, we become more vulnerable in proportion to the rudeness and unreflectedness of what Jacques Rancière calls our “division of the perceptible”. To judge by its social, ecological and geopolitical consequences, this discrepancy between power and sensibility may well be the occasion of a “neganthropic” failure. In the face of the multiple dangers of self-destruction that our own development threatens us with, it is urgent that we reform our mode of social regulation so that everyone can benefit from the artistic experience to update his/her sensitivity: this might well be a vital precondition for the human adventure to persevere in its being.

English translation: John O'Brien