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Thinking Degree Zero

In keeping with the best French practice of a generation back, Simon Critchley’s *Very Little . . . Almost Nothing* boasts an impressive-sounding, triadic, conjunction-free subtitle, viz. ‘Death, Philosophy, Literature’, topics which in some measure it undeniably does address. Once passé at home, Continental trends generally have to wait for their Anglo-American reincarnations,¹ so this book is actually one of a newish (1996–) series from Routledge, called, after its editorial base in that university, Warwick Studies in European Philosophy. The volume’s eye-catching appearance is evidently intended to advertise the contents (and the purchaser, should he leave it lying around) as seriously cutting-edge.

Each of the book’s four sections is prefaced by a page blank except for the same five photographs marching down the outer margin. On close inspection these tiny 35 mm-sized frames appear to depict soulful, Angst-stricken figures in a candle-lit interior, somewhat in the manner of Expressionist silent cinema. The front cover, a similarly grainy monochrome photograph (very Sixties, very French, very Godard), shows the naked bust of a careworn, middle-aged man, whose upper lip is encrusted with the congealed remnants of a nosebleed. His eyes are closed, but in a manner suggesting sleep or meditation rather than death. On the back cover we see him from behind, standing, so he is evidently still alive. But if that signifies hope, Dr Critchley’s title pares it down to a minimum.

The portentous packaging of *Very Little . . . Almost Nothing* – the phrases are Adorno’s – is an only slightly unfair reflection of the book’s

° All unprefixed page references are to this work (London: Routledge, 1997).

R. Grant, *Imagining the Real*
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‘thematic’ (to parody its own idiom). The substance is less a series of worked-out propositions addressed to the reader’s understanding (though there are some), than an invitation to participate in the book’s general intellectual atmosphere, that being a familiar, heady mixture of 
soixante-huit et après and what is nowadays loosely dubbed ‘Continental philosophy’, complete with the latter’s characteristic gloom and doom. Put those together, and you have (roughly) what in British humanities departments is called Theory, a jumble of vaguely interrelated medical, military, linguistic, political, revolutionary and post-theological metaphors prematurely bundled up into a Weltanschauung.

This curious world is shot through with existential imperatives only the more melodramatically urgent for being totally unspecified. Here one does not think about obligation, but simply thinks it (a Heideggerian trope, p. 190n.). Anything not a ‘site of resistance’ (pp. 159, 171) must be discursively, which is to say politically, ‘privileged’ (p. 125), and thus be subject to ‘critique’ (passim); everything, consciously or not, is part of some ‘dialectic’ and, as such, something to be ‘negotiated’ (p. 155; that’s enough references); events take place, at this or that ‘level’ (cf. Althusser, structuralism), in similarly non-physical ‘spaces’ or ‘locations’; to act is never merely to act (e.g. boil an egg, pay the gas bill, do as one ought), but rather to ‘inscribe’ (or ‘insert’) something ‘within’ (or ‘into’) something else; practice is elevated to ‘praxis’; everything is problematic (or rather, has a ‘problematic’); no human gesture, conception or project but finds itself unwittingly self-entangled in a ‘double bind’; and there is nothing so ordinary as not incessantly to palpitate, at least for those in the know, with an ominous, underlying and yet irreducibly opaque significance. (Or lack thereof, which in the post-modernist or post-structuralist calculus comes to much the same thing; or non-thing; or indeed nothing.)²

This relentless categorizing, conceptualizing, hypostatizing habit perfectly illustrates Whitehead’s ‘fallacy of misplaced concreteness’. Genuine thought points in the direction of knowledge and discovery, even if (as in mathematics) those are only of the implications of existing thoughts. It presupposes what the non-squeamish call ‘reality’, viz. an ‘objective’ realm which, though everything in it is either an actual or possible object of thought, is still in principle distinct from thought.³ In Theory’s world, however, should anything ‘external’ ever make its way into consciousness, the shape it takes is, like everything else, arbitrarily predetermined. Theory is incorrigible by experience. Pretending to prior knowledge, it makes real knowledge impossible. It may, indeed, even celebrate that achievement, as if it somehow registered a universal truth.