Didier Debaise. *Nature as Event: The Lure of the Possible*. Trans. Michael Halewood. Duke University Press 2017. 112 pp. $84.95 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780822369332); $22.95 USD (Paperback ISBN 9780822369486).

Didier Debaise's *Nature as Event: The Lure of the Possible*, recently translated into English, is an important contribution to existing scholarship on the work of the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead. More crucially, it is a timely spur to any thought of nature that can inform the messy and dangerous dealings of the epoch that humanity seems to have ushered in while dragging many other species along—an epoch going by different names such as the Anthropocene, Capitalocene or, in more Earth-centric terminology, a backlash from 'Gaia.'

The difficulty of Whitehead's philosophy is notorious, greeting the newcomer and the seasoned reader alike with an attention-intensive, baroque texture of technically precise concepts; and this demand for 'coherence' responds to an overall agenda that is bound to be counterintuitive, if not deliberately provocative. Especially relevant is Whitehead's challenge to anthropocentric forms of thought resting on a presupposed human exceptionalism, as well as to the reification of divisions such as those between values and facts and between subjectivity and objectivity.

Debaise's book is valuable not only in that it makes a situated and comprehensive 'reprise' of Whitehead's main ideas, exhibiting them with surprising clarity and elegance of organization, but also because it offers a concise answer to the question of why departing from Whitehead—in the sense of coming to terms with the ‘adventurous’ quality of the ideas he puts into play—may be more than worthwhile in this moment of worldly stabilities thrown off-kilter. Thus, there is a subtle 'presentism' to this book's brand of historicity-without-historicism, refracting the Whiteheadian question of importance through 'our contemporary experience and the possibilities that animate it' (86).

The book's goals vis-a-vis Whitehead's philosophy can be differentiated, for practical purposes, into ‘expository’ and more transformative aspects, although it is hard to make a clear-cut separation here. This is the point of terms like ‘reprise’ and ‘inheritance,’ both serving Debaise as legitimate characterizations of the specific relation of appropriation he entertains with his subject matter: after all, the idea that an inheritance or transmission from the past may not necessarily exclude nondeterministic creativity is deeply pertinent to Whitehead's philosophy, and here corresponds to the problem of what Debaise calls a ‘mannerism.’ Thus, this heuristic distinction is merely intended to mark the places where Debaise's efforts in drawing out the internal tensions of Whitehead's construction take on a more accentuated character.

In light of this distinction, we can tentatively outline the chain of Whiteheadian concepts that receive expository treatment: the bifurcation of nature; subjectivity; feeling, prehension and the 'mannerist' plurality of existents; and, finally, importance, value and potentiality. We can reserve the category of a more transformative relay to the informative discussion about Whitehead's Platonism embodied in the concept of ‘eternal objects,’ as well as the closing emphasis Debaise places on what he calls ‘the intensification of experience.’ This list is based on a distribution that relies on the preeminence given to three works respectively: *The Concept of Nature*, *Process and Reality,* and *Modes of Thought*.

The book's early sections are distinctive in exhibiting a sure-handed and economical reading of the conditions and chain of engagements, which led Whitehead to arrive at a fullblown metaphysics with relevance beyond the human. Debaise makes a pedagogically useful gesture of starting with Whitehead's diagnosis of a 'bifurcation of nature' in application to European conceptions of nature and corporeality since Galileo. Here this concept is situated as an entrenched attitude to corporeality

actualized in local operations, difficult to question for the very reason of its ubiquity across modernity. Quoting Whitehead, Debaise informs us that the concept of bifurcation is created to identify and criticize an arbitrarily naturalized rift between a 'reality which is there for knowledge' and a reality established by 'the byplay of the mind' or, equally, between 'causal nature' and 'apparent nature' (5).

Here, bifurcation finds illustration in its prominent philosophical avatar, the distinction between primary and secondary qualities, according to which an objectivity stripped of timbre, colour, taste and hardness/softness is complemented by a human subjectivity conceived as the source or repository of these excised qualities (2, 41). Against this position, we learn that Whitehead makes a gesture of saving the aesthetic dimension of existence from being a merely 'adventitious' appendage to the dimension of brute facts. Ultimately, as Debaise writes, it becomes a matter of an aesthetics, which 'becomes the site of all ontology' (58).

Debaise also distinguishes bifurcation from dualism (i.e., mind-body type), in arguing for its different configuration as well as primacy. In fact, it seems hard to contest that the reach of bifurcation as Whitehead identifies it is wider, and shelters a series of oppositions that have never ceased to create controversy since at least his time: between reductionism and emergence; vitalism and mechanism/physicalism; values and facts. In the book, the crucial test which would prove that it is possible to be a dualist—of a sort—without returning to bifurcation finds illustration in Debaise's nuanced discussion of the very troubling Whiteheadian 'eternal objects.'

Debaise places the major Whiteheadian gestures against the backdrop of such a project of revising abstractions: adventurous conceptions of feeling and subjectivity that would evenly accommodate them within the fabric of the real, implying their 'generalization to all forms of life' (45). Apart from the 'depsychologization' of feeling necessary here, it becomes apparent that Whitehead's philosophy displays a certain tendency toward the generic — and the question becomes that of knowing whether it is a generic that is equivalent to an impoverishing abstraction, or one that would be at home with the specificity, the particularity or the richness and concretion of existents. Debaise's discussion carries an affirmative answer to this question, largely thanks to his extended reconstruction of a problem of mannerism attendant on feelings and subjectivity.

Here it is possible to touch on two interrelated aspects of the book's discussion of 'universal mannerism.' The first one is the detailed picture we are given regarding the relational nature of the feelings and prehensions that go into the makeup of a subject. Debaise's presentation leaves no doubt regarding Whitehead's position as an endorser of a radical empiricism, which insists on the primacy of relations to substantial terms, activities of prehension or possession to possessing entities, and individuations to individuals. As he concludes at the end of the chapter relevant to this question: 'It is not possible to get beyond a form of empiricism where what counts are the interactions in which living beings are engaged' (75).

The second aspect I would like to highlight extends this last question: whether it would be possible—and if so, how?—to make room for 'self-determination' and the possibility of novelty in a pluralistic world of feeling perspectives tightly interconnected with and determining each other: if everything constantly receives, 'prehends,' collects others' activity into its own activity, it becomes important to be able to account for difference and unpredictable individuation. What Whitehead calls 'concrescence' perhaps does not find elaboration in this particular book by Debaise, but the reader is offered another way into a possible understanding of 'elbow-room for self determination' as Whitehead conceives it (cf. Isabelle Stengers's work).

A notion of manner or mannerism here does double duty as a medium of differentiation of existents—in the preferential absence of schemes influenced by bifurcation—and an affirmation of

the above-mentioned ‘elbow-room’ with regard to the vast web of (past) interrelations which sustain and generate individuals and subjects through activities of reciprocal prehension: it indexes both concrete differences that can be outlined against the generic plurality of feeling existents, and creativity. Manner, then, is both a primary ontological category and the name of a maneuvrability covered by that category, used to acknowledge the styles and novel or unpredetermined modes which can be introduced to the way anything is felt and prehended. Perhaps the clearest illustration of this second function of manner is found in Debaise's brief discussion of the difference between living societies and material bodies. In Debaise's Whiteheadian version of this relation, the living differs from stones and such through their capacity to 'reinvent, in part, the manner in which they inherit themselves' (74).

The antecedents of this concept (manner) for a measured break with antecedent are named in Debaise's work: from Leibniz to Deleuze, Souriau (whose work on modes of existence seems important here) and, naturally, Whitehead, a mannerist lineage is foregrounded here. Ultimately, the more transformative aspect that characterizes Debaise's relation to Whitehead also gravitates around the question of experience. In a section likely to appeal to historians and activists as well as philosophers, Debaise recovers from Whitehead's writings not only a nonreactionary discourse about value and importance that can speak to contemporary planetary emergencies, but also a new definition of speculative philosophy: ‘the intensification of experience to its maximal point’ (81). A privileged gateway to the said intensification also provides the book's subtitle: the ‘lure of the possible.’ In a discussion well worth thoughtful reception by any number of readers, Debaise teases out a Whiteheadian philosophy of the counterfactual, and evokes the power of effective fictions that would not only be abstract possibilities but living ruses carved inside actual events, signalling the latter's power of internal transformation—a philosophical gesture that would surely find a resonant case in the disproportion between climate change and the current human responses to it.

Berkay Ustun, Beykent University