

the world, for a few hours, the way scientists do: joyously surprising, riotously precise, worthy of Democritean laughter.

—*Reviel Netz*

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Bruno Latour, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence: An Anthropology of the Moderns*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 520 pp.

An Inquiry into Modes of Existence (AIME) is a multimedia exhibition of the results of Latour’s thirty-year-long investigation into how Moderns—Western, educated, technically well-equipped, well-meaning, proudly enlightened, and self-described rational humans—comport themselves and explain the world. It is also a systematic, comprehensive ontology. The enterprise (500-page text, charts, glossary, elaborate online apparatus, densely packed hypertexts, and ever-expanding addenda) is exceptionally ambitious. But the achievement is genuinely grand: an intellectual feast and adventure that will give its readers much to savor and ponder in the years to come.

A mode of existence in *AIME* is a way of keeping going, of operating more or less effectively across temporal, spatial, and other ontological discontinuities. The modes include a number of familiar—though here significantly defamiliarized—domains of Modern (and more general) activity, such as *law*, *politics*, *technology*, and *religion*, plus some unusual but, in *AIME*’s scheme, no less fundamental ones, such as *reference*, *metamorphosis*, *fiction*, and *attachment*. In successive chapters Latour introduces the individual modes by unfolding—slowly, richly, often humorously, sometimes mordantly—the distinctive features of each: the trajectory it pursues to keep going; the discontinuities it must traverse along the way; the determinations of truth and falsity by which it operates; the type of outcome it achieves when all goes well; and the always fragile beings—for example, mountains, machines, human collectives, fictional characters, psyches, or angels—instituted by its always contingent operations. Along the way, his alter ego, an earnest female ethnographer, puts the increasingly complex scheme to use interpreting the peculiar practices and puzzling self-explanations of the tribe—the Moderns—she is investigating. Readers familiar with Latour’s work will recognize the elaborations and updates of his earlier writings, especially *Irreductions* and *We Have Never Been Modern*. But *AIME* subsumes and transforms the entire Latourian corpus, here put in the service of a more radically comprehensive vision and mission.

All the modes of existence in *AIME* are “rational” (or at least none is “irra-

tional”), and the entities associated with each are “real,” though, given Latour’s skeptical view of the Moderns’ veneration of Reason and Reality, one recognizes irony in his use of these terms. Indeed, there is some irony in Latour’s use of any term, including his own labels, puns, and neologisms. A thorough nominalist, he is appreciative of rhetoric but irreverent toward word forms as such. (He cites Paul: “For the letter killeth.”) In *AIME* as elsewhere in Latour’s writings, the abstractions, dualisms, and monster reifications crucial to Modern thought—Nature and Society, Mind and Matter, Science, the Economy, and so forth—are not so much analyzed or deconstructed as exploded into Dickensian carnivals, crammed with colorful characters and tangible things in motion, all engaged in densely inter-implicated activities. As notable as the pluralism of Latour’s ontology—his insistence on the irreducible multiplicity and heterogeneity of equally existent beings and ways of being—is its dynamism.

The modes of existence in *AIME* are, significantly, also mutually incommensurable. What Latour calls “category mistakes” lead recurrently to conflicts and misunderstandings, as when a mode is grasped in the wrong key or when spokesmen for some mode (for example, poets, popes, or positivist philosophers) claim supremacy or unique truth for their favored mode and fail to respect the ontological claims of other modes. The most continuously significant category mistake in *AIME* (and the one most conspicuously vexing for its author) involves the religious mode of existence and whoever—or whatever spokesmen—would deny its reality, dismiss it, or defend it in the wrong way. The mistake here is a failure to recognize the distinctive trajectories, types of transcendence, outcomes, and instituted beings of religion, for example, liturgy, iconography, salvation, or the Virgin. (Allusions to Christian tradition and its appurtenances in *AIME* are less than confessional but more than incidental. “Religion” here is identified, without apology, with an exceedingly nuanced and rather heterodox Catholicism.) Thus, it is improper to assess the truth of religious speech—which, when felicitous, “transports” persons, not information—by the mode of veridiction associated with the sciences. The latter mode, which Latour calls “Double Click” (the idea or ideal of immediate, undistorted communication), is invoked throughout *AIME*, usually with mock—or maybe not altogether mock—dread and revulsion.

Latour indicates that *AIME* is energized in part by two major table-turnings that characterize the present era. One is the growing ascendancy of “the Others,” that is, human collectives that Moderns dominated for centuries and scorned as premodern. The other turnaround, even more drastic, is by “Gaia,” the living planet that modernizers plundered and polluted and that now appears poised to destroy us all. Evidently in the hope that humans may be saved from each other and from a ravaged planet, Latour, here in his alternate role of earnest, naive ethnographer, dreams of an anthropologically informed “diplomacy”: an ongoing

mediation of different, currently conflicting ways of being that will encourage the assembly of a new Commons and the mobilization of a Common Sense. A major instrument of the mediation would evidently be *AIME* itself, augmented by its cadre of co-contributors and continuously reinterpreted, retranslated, and retransmitted. The dream is fortified to some extent by the image of a Commons that existed before the Reformation, the Scientific Revolution (Latour indicts it specifically), and the Enlightenment—in short, before the arrival of his “Moderns.” One notes, however, that Latour seems to grow fonder of that tribe as it moves toward likely extinction.

AIME requires intense mulling as well as careful reading. The task is rewarded by passages of exhilarating acuity, subtlety, and pertinence on every page. There are many quirks here, along with a few pomposities and overly swift brush-offs, but it is always worth giving a second glance at Latour’s apparent extravagances. Few researchers or theorists in our time have labored as hard, long, or resourcefully to illuminate our shared world, and few have set themselves such severe constraints in doing so. At the end, Latour anticipates complaints, acknowledges idiosyncrasies and limits, and summarizes his key aims and tests of success: in effect, to make each mode of existence recognizable on the basis of familiar, everyday experiences; to secure ontological dignity for the most fragile beings and threatened ways of being; and to give an account of Modern existence acceptable to Moderns even as it slices through—and thoroughly redistributes the elements of—the proud accounts they have always given of themselves. Latour’s ultimate mission in *AIME* is to convert the Moderns and offer them/us a path to collective salvation. There is good reason to expect the mission to fail. That it was attempted at all—in this manner, in this century, by so sophisticated a missionary—is rather stunning.

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Adam Thirlwell, *Multiples: An Anthology of Stories in an Assortment of Languages and Literary Styles* (London: Portobello Books, 2013), 379 pp.

This amazing experiment would never have gotten funding from a research council, and its result is maybe not quite as astounding as CERN’s, but thank goodness there still are writers and thinkers with time on their hands to play such crazy and enlightening games. Eleven short stories translated into English from Danish, Spanish, Dutch, Japanese, German, Arabic, Russian, Serbo-Croat, Italian, and Hungarian, as well as one originally written in English, are here