

## BOOK REVIEW

### BY TRANSMISSION: HOW IT ALL COMES DOWN TO NOTHING

A. J. Bartlett

**Gabriel Riera (ed.), *Alain Badiou: Philosophy and its conditions*, New York, Suny, 2005. ISBN: 0791465047**

In 1964 Alain Badiou was present to hear a young Jacques-Alain Miller ask Jacques Lacan the question: “What is your ontology?” Lacan, “our wily master,” Badiou says, “responded with an allusion to non-being, which was well judged, but brief.” It might be conjectured that it was the question rather than Lacan’s answer that made the greatest impression on Badiou. And so, in his 1988 work, *L’Être et l’événement*, Badiou provides his ontology. In a sense each of Badiou’s subsequent works, while comprehensible on their own terms, is also to some extent a ‘manifesto’ for and a praxical exposition of, that ontology. As many of the works in this collection concentrate their attention on the ‘subsequent works’ it is perhaps somewhat ironic, given the strong affiliation some of the contributors maintain to Lacanian readings of Badiou, that they fail to heed the importance of Miller’s intervention, and address themselves to the ontology.

This is the fourth collection dedicated to the work of the philosopher Alain Badiou to appear in English in the past few years.<sup>1</sup> Apart from these specific collections, two book length studies have appeared that rigorously and systematically present Badiou’s work to an English speaking audience.<sup>2</sup> To these must also be added various chapter

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1. In order of appearance there has been *Think Again: Alain Badiou and the Future of Philosophy*, (London: Continuum, 2004); two special issues of *Communication and Cognition*, Volume 36, Nos 1 & 2 and Volume 37, Nos 3 & 4, edited by Dominiek Hoens; and *Polygraph*, No 17, edited by Mathew Wilkens.

2. The first, *Alain Badiou: A critical introduction*, by Jason Barker traverses Badiou’s ontological and philosophical program with a greater emphasis on the political conditioning of Badiou’s thought and the possible political trajectories this opens up in turn. The second and most complete is Peter Hallward’s *Badiou: A Subject to Truth*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), which surveys Badiou’s complete trajectory from his early engagement with Sartre, his involvement with *Cahiers pour l’analyse*, through the years of Althusser and Maoism, with excellent presentations of Badiou’s two major works to date *Théorie du sujet* and *L’Être et l’événement*, up to and including some early insight on Badiou’s forthcoming sequel to *L’Être et*

long introductions, translator introductions and posts-face.<sup>3</sup>

This collection presents as some-what divided between being an introduction to Badiou's thought and a serious assessment of that thought. The back cover announces that, '[T]his volume... brings together leading commentators from both sides of the Atlantic<sup>4</sup> to provide an introduction to Badiou's work through critical studies of his more productive and controversial ideas'. While, in his summary introduction of Badiou's project, the editor Gabriel Riera, assistant professor of Comparative Literature at Princeton, claims that due to Badiou's 'broad intellectual range' and his 'way of conceiving philosophy', any 'serious assessment of Badiou's philosophy...' '...demands a trans-disciplinary perspective'. The question to be asked of such a collection coming as it does in the wake of such a large body of critical, introductory and interventionist work, is—'what does it give us that is not already seen to exist?'

In order to augment a reading strategy which conforms to the 'transdisciplinary' approach, Riera has divided the collection into four sections each nominally conforming to one of Badiou's four conditions for philosophy: mathematics, poetry, love and politics (inexplicably Riera names section four 'Politics and Ethics'). As the blurb suggests, many well known figures contribute to the collection. On my reading, the essays by Madarasz, de Beistegui, Rabaté, Macherey, and Copjec, conform more or less to the form of an introductory exposition. Each takes up a singular theme in Badiou and either exposes its place within Badiou's system or situates it relative to a condition of this system. Norman Madarasz, whose translation of *Court traité d'ontologie transitoire* is forthcoming, sketches the movement of Badiou's thinking on ontology across set theory and category theory. Madarasz's formal approach in this essay amounts to discerning the problem posed for Badiou's axiomatic 'meta-ontological' decision that mathematics (set theory) is ontology, by the rise of category theory as an alternative 'foundational theory' in mathematics. The essential term here, as Madarasz makes plain is 'transitory'

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*l'événement, Logiques du mondes.*

3. Peter Hallward's long introduction to Badiou's thought, 'Generic Sovereignty,' in *Angelaki*, Vol 3, (1998), 73, 87-108; Hallward's introduction to his translation of *L'Éthique: essai sur le conscience du mal, Ethics: An Essay On the Understanding of Evil*, (London: Verso, 2001); the very thorough post-face to the collection *Theoretical Writings*, ed & trans. Ray Brassier and Alberto Toscano (London: Continuum, 2004); Norman Madarasz's ( a contributor to this collection) introduction to his translation of *Manifeste pour philosophie, Manifesto for Philosophy*, (Albany: Suny University Press, 1999); also the collection of Badiou's writings on Samuel Beckett, translated and collected under the title *On Beckett*, Nina Power & Alberto Toscano, eds., (Manchester: Clinamen Press, 2003), containing an excellent introductory essay and an extended post-face by Andrew Gibson on contrasting Badiou's analysis of Beckett with Anglophone critics; and lastly, the collection of Badiou's own essays appearing under the title *Infinite Thought: Truth and the Return to Philosophy*, trans. Justin Clemens and Oliver Feltham (London: Continuum, 2003), which contains an excellent and admirably succinct introduction to Badiou's thought.

4. By the way, a not insignificant fact: on my rough count the Atlantic, stretching as it does from the Barents Sea in the North to Antarctica in the south, touches on some 42 different countries. The contributors in this collection represent just four, with the majority -seven from eleven- hailing from just one country whose shores are lapped by the 'pond' as it were. I mention this fact for it is rather ironic that in Argentina and Brazil to mention just two names, a serious and sustained engagement with Badiou's work has been going on for over twenty years and hence no introduction is needed for 'that side of the Atlantic'

and ultimately he sees in Badiou's 'transitory ontology' a way ahead in the project to 'shift (French) philosophy away from its Heideggerian montage'. One point of interest and perhaps contention unwittingly drawn out by Madarasz—and certainly to the fore in Riera's essay—is the problem of translation. As many of the sections from *Court traité d'ontologie transitoire* have already appeared in English, mostly in *Theoretical Writings*, readers may want to compare the differences in emphasis of the rival translations. What discrepancies there are will appear as not inconsequential to readers familiar with Badiou's terminological deployments. In the essay 'The Ontological Dispute' (translated by Ray Brassier), Manuel de Beistegui, gives an amiable summary of the ontological rift between Badiou and both Heidegger and Deleuze occasioned by the formers 'meta-ontological' decisions regarding mathematics, and the conception of being as pure indifferent multiplicity. De Beistegui sketches the territory shared by the three philosophers and the 'lines of flight' each 'takes' to be rid of this symmetry—retroactively speaking. For the most part de Beistegui agrees that Badiou's project of 'irrecusable leave taking with regard to Heidegger's thought' is as 'lucid as it is imperative' but he is less convinced that a similar leave taking is successful when it comes to Deleuze especially where univocity and difference are concerned. Jean Michel-Rabaté and Joan Copjec though separated in this collection by their being consigned to different 'conditions' provide a similar form of reading in their respective contributions. Both choose not to deal with Badiou head on, as it were, but remain faithful nevertheless to the thought under consideration. In this way they provide excellent introductions to some of the thinking that provides Badiou with 'what is to be thought'. Rabaté considers the significance of Samuel Beckett's prose in relation to Badiou, especially the movement in Beckett from an early Cartesianism to a later subtractive form which, in Badiou's words, seeks out the 'minimal conditions for freedom'. After giving a succinct and prescient background to Badiou's strategy in reading Beckett, Rabaté for the most part provides a close reading of Beckett's *Watt*. Reading the structure and characterisation of that work in such a way as to illuminate several of Badiou's central concepts he provides the excellent example of the arrival of the Galls—the piano tuners—to the house of Mr Knott. Rabaté contends that this signals something of an interruption for Watt, an event, stuck as he is within the repeating 'law' of the house. "Watt did not know what had happened... But he felt the need to think that such a thing had happened." As Rabaté remarks, the task common to both Beckett and Badiou, one in the context of the 'poem' and one in philosophy, is to "compose... the unbreakable (*inecravable*) desire to think".<sup>5</sup> Joan Copjec's essay provides something of a genealogical analysis of Badiou's psychoanalytically conditioned thesis on love. Taking as her starting point an assumption that Badiou's 1998 text for high school students, *L'Éthique: essai sur le conscience du mal*, has its heritage in Jacques Lacan's Seminar XX or *Encore*, Copjec then goes on to provide a reading that situates Badiou, not unproblematically, in a (conceptual) line of descent from Freud. Invoking various texts from Freud and Lacan that deal with love and ethics and importantly, presenting

5. For an excellent essay on this theme see Mladen Dolar, 'Nothing Has Changed,' *Filozofski Vestnik*, Vol XXVI, No. 2, 2005, 147-60.

Bersani's theory of love against Badiou's, Copjec creates a valuable historiography of the psychoanalytic conditioning of Badiou's thought on love (if not on ethics, which for Badiou is not independent of the procedures of truths). Copjec has presented a faithful work of elegant juxtaposition which illuminates important aspects of the thought which Badiou considers to be the 'educator to every philosophy to come'. Pierre Macherey provides us with a commendably short and precise essay that considers which Mallarmé is seen to exist in light of Badiou's positioning of him as an exemplary figure within his 'inaesthetics'. In effect, Macherey asks and answers, why Mallarmé? What makes Mallarmé a condition for philosophy? Invoking Badiou's Platonism, Macherey contends that for Badiou, Mallarmé (along with those few others—Celan, Pessoa, Rimbaud etc, the 'localised selection' as Macherey calls them), has created works that actively interrupt or refuse the representational or mimetic in their construction. It is this rigorous practice of 'rarefaction', as Macherey puts it, (subtraction in Badiou's terms) that signals for Badiou a process of truth immanent to art practice and as such, a 'condition' for philosophical thought. Macherey concludes by wondering whether this conception of Badiou's can become more generalised to incorporate a less selective series of artists works. This seems to me the right question to ask and one which I would suggest has a positive answer. For although Badiou is fairly consistent in regard to those names that appear in his series of poets, it is by no means exhaustive. Thus it is precisely that these poets *name* an artistic procedure that they do not and cannot constitute its completion.

Those not included in the category of introductory essay, McNulty, Riera, MacCannell and Critchley, each attempt what we must consider, in light of the editors comments, a 'serious assessment' of Badiou's philosophy. However, the essays by Riera and MacCannell, while perhaps serious, fail as assessment. Somewhat counter intuitively perhaps, I suggest that one reason for this has to do with the very Lacanian fidelities of their authors. In fact what I think MacCannell's, Riera's and McNulty's contributions here expose is something that needs to be remarked in the context of Badiou scholarship and that is, that while Badiou certainly positions contemporary philosophy under condition of Lacanian psychoanalysis, this by no means means that those schooled in Lacanian theory are best placed to appreciate the systematic rigour of Badiou's philosophical project; especially when it is the compossibility of the 'four conditions'—science, politics art and love—whose subtractive procedures constitute the thought which *philosophy* thinks. A general question can be posed in this context; are Lacanian's best placed to think the non-relation between Badiou as philosopher and Lacan as anti-philosopher? Such a thought must journey through the ontology and deal with the 'real' of the void. I suggest that on the evidence presented here, there can be no simple critical transference from one to the other.

Tracy McNulty and Juliet Flower MacCannell tread somewhat similar ground. Both are concerned with the 'place' of woman and of feminine love. And both address Badiou's reading of love as a truth procedure, ontologically scripted and subjectively universal, through their Lacanian expertise. McNulty contends that by de-situating the feminine from the not-all to the universal Badiou has done so at the cost of restating

a ‘feminine specificity’. McNulty argues, that the Lacanian rendering of the place of woman as *pas tout* actually better accounts for the difference or the sexual non-rapport between the two positions in such a way that the centrality and value of this irreducible difference is maintained—the better to do ‘double battle’ against the enjoyment of the Other. And, as such, there is a functioning and autonomous space available to the feminine, finally irreducible to the determinations of the Other. She contends that Badiou’s desire to do away with the big Other, God (a success Badiou attributes to Cantor), leaves the feminine exposed to the banality and disaster of a sort of flattening equality. While McNulty’s piece is by far the best of the ‘serious assessments’ and it does ask some important questions, particularly of Badiou’s assumption of Saint Paul’s militant form of love, the critical mistake McNulty makes in this context is the confusion of Badiou’s conception of universalism with that of the All or Totality. McNulty reads Badiou as saying that the place of woman is then that of the ‘support’ to this totality. As such its place is only guaranteed, as a non-place rather than as *pas tout* (not all). That Badiou’s ascription of the place of woman carries with it no gender identity, as it is no-place—void to identity qua identity—is thus problematic for McNulty. There is no room here to draw out the distinction between totality and universalism in Badiou’s work (and in the cited text Badiou uses the expression ‘universal totality’ and only once) suffice to say that universalism for Badiou, is not a point of closure but rather the praxical index of a subjective trajectory. To invoke category theory, it is the ‘vector of subjectivity’ and not its normative ground. The one is always a result for Badiou, and this result maintains disjunction as the ‘law’, he says, of the Two that founds it. As such, an event or encounter as that which supplements the void (the absence of totality) of this two’s situation—the no-place or un-place—initiates a process named love that instates the truth of this two. “Love makes truth of this disjunction” Badiou says—this is its possibility.<sup>6</sup> As such Badiou’s ontologically formed prescription of an indifference to difference (which a truth is) functions as the guarantee of the impossibility of any pre-assigned subjective identification—and hence wards off an imposed totality or, the regime of well-ordered place. Such a Love (truth, justice) then, is not for the feint hearted. MacCannell is also concerned with Badiou’s treatment of love but to this reader at least, the Badiou to whom she addresses her contribution was unrecognisable. By far the largest problem with her reading is that she makes no distinction (in point of fact refuses too) between set theory and topos or category theory and therefore has no way to employ the critical distinction in Badiou’s work between being as pure multiplicity, and the regime of its appearing—therefore completely confusing the mathematics and the logic, the axiomatic and its laws of operation, the ontology and the philosophy. The constant accusation she makes against Badiou, that he is ‘topologising this and topologising that’ (paradoxical in respect of Lacan?) and that he therefore believes mathematics will solve everything, leaves much to be desired. Two examples: “For the properly formalised (topologised) Subject, Badiou sees the void opening on to a New

6. Alain Badiou. ‘What Is Love,’ trans Justin Clemens, *Umbr(a) {One}*, (1996), 46.

Age (overtones intended), an age of fraternity”, and “He (Badiou) is, indeed, supremely confident that the Subject arriving at this other scene will find no trace of pain, guilt, or torment, for its destructiveness will already be mathematically defused.” The second accusation however is not devoid of some irony in the context as the text most cited by MacCannell *La Scène du Deux*, from *De l’amour*, contains a recitation by Badiou of an accusation leveled against him by a certain ‘broadcaster’. The broadcaster, as Badiou tells it, claimed that for Badiou it was not a matter of saying *je t’aime* (I love you) but *je te mathème* (I matheme you). Badiou, arguing that what the broadcaster alludes to is the central trope of all anti-philosophy, that ‘love is the intensity of existence itself’ and best captured only in art, then goes on to construct the ontological status of sexual non-rapport. This is not a reduction of love to ontology, but an ontological inscription of what it is that love, as a procedure of truth, sustains through the encounter that established its existence. So, and this is the point, the encounter demands the thought of ‘the encounter’. Philosophy becomes, as Badiou never tires of making plain, that which thinks together, the encounter, through reference to its site, and the truth of that encounter sustained by the subjectivity it convokes. It is the subject that literally constructs the topos of the encounter. Curiously, MacCannell merely repeats the accusation of the broadcaster without really engaging with Badiou’s response to it. Thus as a faithful Lacanian, taking in effect what amounts to a very flippant attitude to Badiou’s work, she commits an act of pure anti-philosophy. There is no way MacCannell cannot be aware of this and it seems to me that given her disengaged and rather elevated tone throughout, we are merely witnessing MacCannell ‘enjoying’. For example, at one stage she equates Badiou’s political ‘disquiet’ with parliamentary procedures as complicit with that of Bush, claiming that the difference is in the fact that Badiou’s ‘exasperation is entirely abstract’: An accusation unsustainable politically and also revealing in regard to her ‘conception’ of mathematics. After claiming Badiou’s stance is difficult to discern amongst the plethora of twentieth century political claims she says, “he permits no primal Other to intervene to separate or split the Subject, or merge its multiplicity into a singularity”. This sentence coupled with the first example above, announces all that is missed in MacCannell’s decision to read Badiou as if he were a wayward Lacanian. The confusion shown in regard to the ontological aspects necessitates, I would say, the failure to realise that the *subject* for Badiou is founded—singularised—as the result of a decision. As such, its very being *is* split, it does not come to be split *by anything*, (“one divides into two” as Mao put it), simply because there is no subject prior to the event. The event for Badiou is that which ‘convokes’ a subject, whose constitutive act is to freeze the event nominally (secure its trace in being) and as its constitutive practice, make veridical for that situation the statement (concerning the event) ‘it will have been true’. This ‘split’ is thus very different in the Badiouean subject to that found in Lacan. As such, MacCannell is correct; Badiou’s subject is not Lacan’s.

Gabriel Riera, writing under heading of the Poem, presents a strange, disjointed and literally repetitive piece which never really gets going one way or another. Arguments are foregrounded never to appear. Propositions are made, come to nothing and are

made again. And sentences and paragraphs return as if they were being written for the first time and thus for example, we are told more than once that “regarding tropes everything happens, between truth and knowledge”. Yet we learn nothing about this most fundamental of Badiouian distinctions—each time. Various, Riera claims to be engaging in a consideration of Badiou’s notion of inaeconomics (which he considers to be a hybrid of anti- and para-, and not then an ‘inaeconomics’ at all), of a critique of Badiou’s failure to thematise the notion of the end, to be conducting an investigation of Badiou’s use of the term and deployment of the concept ‘the age of the poets’, and to show that Badiou submits to a ‘classical economy of use’ in regard to his conceiving of a ‘new relation’ of philosophy to the poem. But all of this comes too little as the cut and paste technique intervenes yet again to forestall any sense of coherence. Indeed many of Riera’s propositions would be well worth pursuing, yet while it is high on terminological acrobatics the essay is low on ‘analysis’ or ‘assessment’ and certainly provides little that someone new to Badiou’s thinking might follow as an introduction. The essay reads rather like that of a keen undergraduate, all the parts are there but they are poorly placed and lack any definitive line of argument or consistency. It is unfortunate but readers will not learn much from Riera on the significance or function of essential terminologies such as inaeconomics, compossibility, suture, militancy, event-site or condition for that matter—and one could go on. As he concedes in an endnote, the essay is a ‘coming together’ of two talks given in 1999 and 2001. Symptomatic of this long gestation to publication, is Riera’s decision to translate Badiou’s ‘*événementiel*’ as eventful, against the critical consensus that has crystallised around the neologism ‘evental’: As Peter Hallward pointed out some time ago the choice for the latter has good theoretical justification.<sup>7</sup> Although Riera’s editors introduction is itself rather perfunctory it can clearly be seen that Riera’s comprehension of Badiou’s project has increased since 2001. It is a question again of asking why? Why that is, in light of the intervening years of secondary scholarship and the developments in Badiou’s own work, publish such a poorly constructed and unengaging essay which asks nothing pertinent of Badiou’s unique intervention on the regime of modern aesthetics—a project, which in my estimation, has highly significant consequences for a thinking of education in the contemporary age of the ‘knowledge economy’. It might also be interesting in this context to assess the possibilities or otherwise of forging links between inaeconomics, transitory ontology and meta-politics—links whose implications for praxis are yet to be explored.

The final essay in the collection is by Simon Critchley. Critchley’s contribution began its life as a conference paper given at Bordeaux in 1999, subsequently published in French as *Comment ne pas céder sur son désir? (Sur l’éthique de Badiou)*.<sup>8</sup> It has appeared previously as is, in *Radical Philosophy*, 100, March/April 2000. Strangely, this goes unmentioned either in the footnotes or by the editor in his introduction—something for the second issue no doubt. As such, what Critchley has to say here—much of which he restates in an interview to be found at the end of the *Polygraph* collection mentioned above—is answered in

7. See, translator’s introduction to *Ethics...*, op. cit., iL.

8. See Charles Ramond (ed.), *Alain Badiou: Penser le multiple* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2002), pp. 207-233.

issue 102 July/August 2000 of *Radical Philosophy* by Peter Hallward. What strikes me as interesting and is a question that must be left suspended is why reprint Critchley's essay now? As mentioned above, in the intervening years there has been much published on Badiou and by Badiou and no shortage of it deals with politics. The reprinting of this essay without emendation, without comment and in complete ignorance of an existing detailed response penned five years ago, really begs the question; Why does this collection exist? Why publish a collection which as a whole asks little of Badiou that is new or particularly pertinent and takes almost no account of the work done on Badiou over the past 5 years in English (at least), or posit any possible tasks for the future? Ultimately the collection suffers from the above mentioned disparity between serious assessment and introductory trans-Atlantic comment. Its intent on both counts is unfulfilled as the best essays are those which function as introductions—these will certainly provide some stimulus to readers who chance across them—but which nevertheless do no more than repeat what already exists among the extensive commentary in English. On the other hand, those presented as serious assessment are nothing of the sort as they fail in critical ways to engage with the systematicity of Badiou's project, opting instead to pick at its outer flesh.

To conclude: In the interview conducted by Bruno Bosteels which concludes the volume, Badiou raises the question of transmission. Transmission, Badiou suggests, is the central concern of the pedagogical act. It involves both the combining of thought—formalised through theory or philosophy—with its experiential or situational conditions *and* the faithful passing on of this 'composition'. This is not at all to say that the procedures of transmission must be uncritical or necessarily didactic or dogmatic although these aspects may well be present and I would argue, have a certain function in any transmission—depending on the 'tactical' circumstances. Badiou goes on to say, Platonic tongue only partly in cheek, that the job of a teacher—a philosopher—involves a corruption. Thus a successful act of transmission results in an actual corruption—one is *forced* to think again. However, the question arises, what if the act of transmission goes awry and is itself that which is corrupt? Thus the corrupting effect immanent to the philosophy is itself corrupted by the act of transmission and thus enters the situation as an already negated negation, as it were, engendering only an anodyne *addition* to the 'what is' of the situation. In '*Qu'est-ce qu'une institution philosophique?*' from *Conditions*, Badiou argues that it is the role of the subject of a philosophy to support a transmission—in essence to "struggle against revisionism".<sup>9</sup> As is well known a subject for Badiou may indeed be a collective, a Two, a mathematician caught in the grip of a revolutionary theorem or indeed a series of works. Given the centrality of this notion of transmission, whose status is that of an intervention, the question then becomes, 'does this collection support a transmission'? Or, does it revise the philosophy appropriate to the regime of knowledge that is already seen to exist?

Permit me one further observation: In an article written in 2002 (*Radical Philosophy*,

9. See Badiou's 'Afterword', (trans Alberto Toscano) in *Think Again*, op. cit., 237.



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111), that purported to consider Alain Badiou's ethics of truths in light of certain aspects in the work of Adorno, Peter Dews concluded with a rather patronising warning to Anglo readers. They should, he said, "be wary of taking too eagerly to the "latest *maître à penser*, the new apostle to the Anglophone gentiles". Let me end with a rhetorical question posed in light of this warning and in the context of the appearance of this collection; what if the problem is truly the reverse and it is the *maître à penser* who best beware of the Anglophone gentiles?

A. J. Bartlett  
Deakin University