

WHEREFORE ART THOU PHILOSOPHY?

BADIOU WITHOUT BADIOU¹

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ABSTRACT: Given the encroaching, seemingly pernicious backlash against Alain Badiou's thinking, which appears partly motivated by the bad faith of "philosophical" rivalries, this essay aims to argue in favour of the ongoing and authentically *philosophical* stakes of Badiou's ontology. At the same time the essay attempts to highlight the methodological difficulties Badiou encounters in attempting to reconcile an intrinsic ontology as the dominant condition of philosophy, with a philosophy of the event. The essay concludes by speculating on the "unbound", "unconditioned" potential of this two-headed philosophy.

KEYWORDS: Ontology; Speculative Materialism; Shakespeare; sans-philosophie

I wish to begin this essay with an example. Readers familiar with Alain Badiou's work may notice a difficulty with it. I will address this difficulty at the end. For the moment, at the risk of misleading and mis-representing Badiou's work to those less familiar with it, I politely ask for their indulgence. Here is the example, which takes the form of a statement: "O Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo?"² As is so often the case in "young love", Juliet, who mouths these words alone on her balcony, barely knows Romeo, although the very next day they will be married. Although neither is aware of it yet their passing acquaintance has already triggered a set of consequences which in scope and pure intensity will surpass them both. The outcome will be calamitous for all concerned. But it is also fair to speculate that Love itself, in the wake of this prodigal encounter, is destined never to be quite the same again.

¹ I would like to thank Justin Clemens and Ray Brassier for commenting on previous drafts of this essay.

² Shakespeare references are taken from *Romeo and Juliet*, ed. B. Gibbons, Arden Shakespeare, 2nd Edition, 1980.

I hope this metaphor will serve to illustrate the sizable impact of Alain Badiou's intervention in contemporary philosophy. Given the encroaching and seemingly pernicious backlash against his thinking, no doubt partly motivated by the bad faith of "philosophical" rivalries,³ hopefully this essay can serve to remind readers of the ongoing and authentically *philosophical* stakes of Badiou's ontology.

I: ALIEN ENCOUNTER

In the late 90s and early 2000s, when Badiou first made contact with his Anglophone public, it is no exaggeration to say that the effect was somewhat monstrous. After all, here was a thinker who straddled the French post-War currents of existentialism, Marxism and the philosophy of mathematics; who claimed to have devised the most radical materialism since Lucretius; who declared that "ontology = mathematics"; who drew a direct parallel between his magnum opus *Being and Event* and Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* and, not content with that, then announced his intention to write a new *Science of Logic*. Initial encounters with Badiou's remarkable yet highly provocative "alien"⁴ philosophy tended to inspire readings such that, in the published work of his first Anglophone disciples, the names of Althusser, Beckett, Deleuze, Lacan, Mao, Marx and Sartre were repeated reference points. Although Badiou's philosophy is unfamiliar enough to resist easy categorisation, clearly it brings with it a formidable intellectual reputation.

Today things are different. "Badiou's philosophy" is no longer Badiou's philosophy. Badiou, one might say, has taken leave of his own system. This is perhaps the highest compliment one could pay a living philosopher (who has spawned a "live theory"⁵) whereby the consequences of (his) thinking become absolutely incalculable for thinking. If "Badiou" has become a philosophical signifier then today it's no longer a question of the faithful reception, transmission and assimilation of "his" ideas. Instead it's a matter of philosophical invention, and we shouldn't underestimate the extent to which Badiou's many exacting readers have contributed to it.⁶ For this

³ One article and two books stand out, the latter of which are yet to be published in English: R. L. Nirenberg and D. Nirenberg 'Badiou's Number: A Critique of Mathematics as Ontology' in *Critical Inquiry* (forthcoming); Mehdi Belhaj Kacem, *Après Badiou*, Paris, Grasset, 2011; François Laruelle, *Anti-Badiou*, Paris, Kimé, 2011.

⁴ I borrow the term from Ray Brassier, *Alien Theory. The Decline of Materialism in the Name of Matter*. PhD thesis, Warwick University, UK, 2001.

⁵ The aptly-named title of a series of monographs published by Continuum which includes a study of Badiou by Oliver Feltham.

⁶ Among the most interesting of several Badiou-inspired philosophical inventors are Ray Brassier and Quentin Meillassoux, whose respective works I shall briefly consider in what follows.

reason there is no need to introduce Badiou's work or chart its evolution.⁷ Instead I want to address what I regard as the most urgent philosophical consequences of that work – which of course is ongoing – but which for the sake of brevity I will confine to *Being and Event*⁸ and the books and essays which have followed it. More than any other single work *Being and Event*, in its radical rethinking of the philosophical mission and status of ontology, purports to change the nature of philosophical practice itself.

Let us now consider the title of this essay, “Wherefore art thou philosophy?” which may be a useful way of reflecting on that which philosophy, in Badiou's sense of the word, implies. First and foremost, Badiou's is a philosophical *intervention* in the sense that it marks a direct assault on the dominant paradigms in contemporary philosophy of post-Kantian relativism and anti-foundationalism. Like Louis Althusser, Badiou sees philosophy as objectless and contentless. In itself, philosophy has no object i.e. it is not a form of knowledge. Instead, philosophy is the struggle and “battleground” over its own discursive field. However, unlike Althusser for whom philosophy had a properly political field of application (the so-called “class struggle in theory”⁹), Badiou insists on “desuturing” philosophy as such from any dominant discourse or practice, be it politics or art, mathematical science or love. Crucially, these are the only four such discourses or practices which Badiou will entertain as *possible* philosophical discourses, or “conditions” of philosophy. And they are possible in the sense of being contingent upon the coming about of “events”, the incalculable and non-provable supplements of “situations”.

The *a priori* conditions of “situations” are what Badiou regards as the prerequisites of thinking and being. Badiou is in no way concerned, as was Kant, with unifying the rationalist and empirical paradigms of philosophy. Badiou's supreme indifference to Kantian critique is presumably one of the reasons why Peter Osborne defines his philosophical project as *neo-classic*.¹⁰ Since “thinking and being are the same”¹¹ philosophy can only inquire into its own conditions. “The world” or external reality is not an object for philosophy. Whereas, by complete contrast, the task of philosophical

⁷ Helpful book-length English introductions to Badiou's work include: Jason Barker, *Alain Badiou. A Critical Introduction*. London, Pluto Press, 2002; Oliver Feltham, *Alain Badiou: Live Theory*. London, Continuum, 2008; Peter Hallward, *Badiou. A Subject to Truth*. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2003.

⁸ Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. O. Feltham. London, Continuum, 2005. [Alain Badiou, *L'Être et l'Événement*. Paris, Seuil, 1988.] Page references to this work refer to both the English and (in brackets) French editions.

⁹ See Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. B. Brewster. London, New Left Books, 1971.

¹⁰ Peter Osborne, “Neo-classic: Alain Badiou's *Being and Event*” in *Radical Philosophy* (142), 2007.

¹¹ Alain Badiou, *ibid.*, p. 38 (p. 49) [Translation modified].

invention, beyond that which merely “is”, is a far more open affair, and equivalent to the realms (“sites”) in which events occur. Badiou thus may be said to be practising a *classical* philosophy of sorts (though undoubtedly “Platonist”) in the sense that philosophy is devoted to the ontological question of “what is”; and a *modern* philosophy in the sense that philosophy, since Nietzsche, has been devoted to the aesthetics of pure creation. Interestingly, events also provide the sites from which truth (or singular “truths”) emerge, a fact which remains one of the most awkward questions for Badiou’s conception of philosophy.

The question “what is philosophy?” – answered prosaically by Deleuze and Guattari as “the creation of concepts”¹² – would thus appear less urgent, even irrelevant, for Badiou. Although he does provide us with a positive definition of philosophy – “the seizure of truths”¹³ – the question for Badiou would appear to be not so much “what?” as “why philosophy?” Philosophy is nothing in itself. Indeed, such is the infinite ontological banality or “ordinary nature” of any given situation that questions of the meaning of life, God, existence or morality – Enlightenment questions still widely considered as the only ones worthy of philosophical reflection – attain no such privilege in Badiou. As far as thinking/being is concerned all we can say with certainty is “there is infinite multiplicity”, a fact which, as Pascal understood, didn’t so much attest to the supreme power of God as to the nothingness of the void.

II: WHY IS LOVE?

In our romantic example Juliet’s ontological question, posed in respect of her beloved Romeo, is equally far-reaching and potentially corrosive for common sense. Having met Romeo at a masquerade ball Juliet now faces a dilemma. But of course the meaning of her actual soliloquy is hardly straightforward and raises as many questions as it answers. “Wherefore art thou Romeo?” is not a question asked directly of Juliet’s beloved. Juliet speaks her “inner dialogue” believing she is alone. But would it somehow have helped the “starcross’d lovers” in their impossible courtship if Romeo were, as Juliet suggests, someone else? Are we being facetious here? Are we perhaps guilty in our analysis of taking Juliet’s words too literally when they are only meant as metaphors, or as dramatic plot devices? Not at all, since what we are always dealing with in “young” or “first love”, or with love in its “purest” form, is an *intrinsic* discourse. From her balcony Juliet is possessed by the question of *how* to pursue her love, which is Love *tout court*. There is no worldly consideration. “Wherefore art thou

¹² Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* trans. H. Tomlinson and G. Burchell. New York, Columbia University Press, 1996.

¹³ See Alain Badiou, *Conditions*, trans. S. Corcoran. London, Continuum, 2009.

Romeo?" is the driving principle at the heart of this without care or concern, either for Juliet's own state of mind, health or family name, nor for that of her beloved. Love itself is all that is at stake here, total and all-encompassing.

We may pause at this point in order to remark that love in its intrinsic and "self-reflexive" dimension recalls the Religion of Love which in the Elizabethan adaptation of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* was allegedly subverted on moral grounds. In contrast to such morality plays in which the law of social graces is transgressed, Francis X. Newman's definition of *amour courtois* entails, "a love at once illicit and morally elevating, passionate and disciplined, humiliating and exalting, human and transcendent."¹⁴ *Amour courtois* lies somewhere between sexual pleasure and neo-Platonic love. It is a crusading sentiment serving love as idea, or as what Jacques Lacan refers to in his *Seminar XVI*, explicitly speaking of *amour courtois*, as "a poetic homage to sexual desire."¹⁵ We will have cause to return briefly to the relationship between love and psychoanalysis, but let us propose for the moment, and taking Lacan's readings of Plato as our guide, that love is the point where the mere fact of sexual difference is annulled.¹⁶

The pursuit of first love, then, is an intimate discipline indifferent to social custom; but also indifferent to the lover's person. The statement "Wherefore art thou Romeo?" is indeed a lure in this sense, a metaphor or dramatic plot device, that is meant to attribute a specific gendered set of relations to a situation; to *represent* that situation for the audience, lecture us about the "inner workings" of these characters' minds and, more importantly, how they ought to behave. However, in its bare ontological dimension perhaps Juliet's question could also be "Wherefore art thou Juliet?" since love, or rather the subject of first love in this sense is indifferent to her empirical being. Indeed, we might wonder quite what role either Romeo or Juliet's respective identities – chief among them their sexual identities as male and female – play in the Religion of Love thus conceived. "What's in a name?" wonders Juliet, "That which we call a rose, By any other name would smell as sweet."

Is Romeo the real object of Juliet's love? Or does her love, in the sense of being a pure intensity, a raw passion, surpass her beloved to the point of having no interest in his "actual person"? Granted the question of unicity is a rather awkward and insistent one from the history of philosophy, and the one which Badiou defines as the "void"

¹⁴ Francis X. Newman ed., *The Meaning of Courtly Love*. Albany, State University of New York Press, 1968, p.vii.

¹⁵ Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire Livre XVI (1968-1969), D'un Autre à l'autre*. Paris, Seuil, 2006.

¹⁶ "The One" is Plato's description of amorous unity in the *Symposium*. As for Lacan, as he states famously in his *Seminar XX*, "there is no such thing as a sexual relationship", which is understood to mean that the relation between male and female resists a static or "symbolic" opposition.

(which in mathematical writing is noted: \emptyset) of his ontology. It is through the *naming* of the void set – “the set that has no element” – that Badiou manages to restrict the problem of (its) “unique” identity. The question is thus reversed. No longer need Juliet doubt the consistency of her heartfelt passion for her one and only Romeo i.e. her *true* love (“What’s in a name?”), since “Romeo” *is* the name for her heartfelt passion, rather than the “actual person” himself. And her heartfelt passion is an open-ended investigation, a subjective process, an experiment, rather than a mere domestic union with finite ends: “My love as deep; the more I give to thee, The more I have, for both are infinite.”

A subjective process has no specific object(ive) and so love, as one such process, is never a question of being “out” of love. One is either in love or not in love. However, the question itself remains. (“To be *or* not to be,” in the words of Hamlet. “That *is* the question.”) Badiou’s ambitious claim in *Being and Event* which has implications for all such ontological statements – i.e. statements of “being” – is to announce that “ontology = mathematics”. The mathematics Badiou has in mind here is that of modern set theory, whose original revolutionary thinker was Georg Cantor.¹⁷ For Badiou if mathematics is the discourse through which our fundamental understanding of “being” can be grasped as truth, then it is thanks to the “mathematico-logical revolution” of Cantor, Kurt Gödel, and Paul Cohen rather than the poetic ontology of Friedrich Hölderlin, Georg Trakl or Paul Celan. For Badiou this Cantorian revolution, which was eventually formalized in the axioms of Zermelo-Fraenkel (ZF) set theory, is the paradigm of that which can be consistently thought; it presents the foundational discourse of what it is possible to think in our epoch.

III: THE MARGIN OF PHILOSOPHY

As Jean-Toussaint Desanti argues, in opting for the “intrinsic ontology” of ZF set theory there is a “price to be paid” in terms of the “reform of philosophical understanding” that Badiou wants to bring about, and has been working toward since the publication of *Being and Event*.¹⁸ This is the question I have metaphorically tried to illustrate as the “Wherefore?” of philosophy. “Wherefore art thou?” is often caricatured or misunderstood as “Where are you?”, but in actual fact means “Why are you?” In attempting to advance his philosophical enterprise, his “system”, Badiou may be increasingly faced with a “fundamental question of ontology” which I would

¹⁷ For a philosophical introduction to set theory see Mary Tiles, *The Philosophy of Set Theory: An Historical Introduction to Cantor’s Paradise*. New York, Dover Publications, 2004.

¹⁸ Jean-Toussaint Desanti, “Some Remarks on the Intrinsic Ontology of Alain Badiou” in Peter Hallward ed. *Think Again. Alain Badiou and the Future of Philosophy*. London, Continuum, 2004.

like to characterize as “Why philosophy?” or more precisely as “Why the need for philosophy?” Simply put, does the “reform of philosophical understanding” under consideration here extend so far as to endanger philosophy, or to render it obsolete, inadequate to the militant project of philosophy in itself? And would it be a positive development “for philosophy” if it were indeed rendered obsolete? *Would it be in keeping with Badiou’s “immanent” philosophical radicalism if mathematics were capable of furnishing this philosophy intrinsically, or intramathematically i.e. with no need whatsoever for an “outside” (which would also relinquish the need for any “inside/outside” as well)?*

Let us note immediately that Badiou’s introduction to *Being and Event* certainly affirms the power of mathematics in the face of philosophy:

Essentially, to affirm that mathematics completes ontology disconcerts philosophers because this thesis frees them absolutely from that which gave their discourse its centre of gravity, the last refuge of their identity. Today mathematics has in effect no need of philosophy, and thus, one may say, the discourse on being is perpetuated “all alone”. It is moreover characteristic that this “today” be determined by the creation of set theory, of mathematized logic, and then by the theory of categories and of *topoi*.¹⁹

We must proceed with caution here since the word “philosophy” is precisely what is at stake:

If philosophy – which is the disposition to designate the conjunction of being and of that-which-happens – was born in Greece it is because ontology established there with the first *deductive* mathematicians the required form of its discourse.²⁰

Let us underline the fact that it is not within the power of philosophy to control this “conjunction”. Indeed, philosophy’s identity oscillates in Badiou’s text between those discourses of *necessity*, wherein the science of being qua being is the dominant condition for a philosophy which *is* nothing in itself apart from pure inconsistency; and those discourses of *contingency* whereby philosophy can only be conceived as absolutely *other* than being (“that-which-happens”). Perhaps this is the point where the “neo-classical” torsion of philosophy – combining what is new and old at the same time – is most pronounced in having to live up to the iconoclastic demands of philosophical modernism – “invention”, “novelty”, “transformation”, etc. – while also retaining the classical dimension of the margin, and the “separation” of philosophy from ontology. Then again, it seems far more striking on the evidence to admit that a false dichotomy may be at work here, since what are we to make of an allegedly

¹⁹ Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, pp. 10–11 (p. 17) [Translation modified].

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 10 (p. 17) [Translation modified].

militant philosophical project which declares the “history of truth”²¹ while having already made its peace with the poetic ontology of Heidegger i.e. while having acknowledged and internalized its own relation to the classical schema of philosophy from Plato to Heidegger? As Jean-Luc Nancy proposes, could we not equate the “history of truth” with metaphysical history? In which case, having had done with teleology, would we not end up in “natural history”?²²

Let me venture a tentative hypothesis at this stage that the “disposition to designate the conjunction” in Badiou’s theoretical enterprise, whereby philosophy is both internalized through the discourse of ZF set theory and externalized through the discourse of the event impedes the radical philosophical potential of said enterprise.

This is not an anti-philosophical hypothesis. I am not seeking the means to topple idols all the better to propose “new” philosophical figures: new Robespierres, Cantors, Mallarmés, Romeos or Juliets. Indeed, the question of “novelty” (the word has a paradoxical connotation in English) is precisely one of the problems. Etienne Balibar has remarked at Badiou’s tautological definition of unicity.²³ I would merely ask, if we accept the definition that “Any unique multiple can receive a proper name, such as Allah, Yahweh, \emptyset or ω_0 ,”²⁴ how might a “new” Robespierre differ from an old one? Or, again following the definition, can it really be said that Romeo and Juliet’s love affair is a *subject* of truth? Is it so unthinkable for thinking to go to work *directly* on its material without the need for second-order naming or designation? Let us recall that in set theory first-order logic is governed by the predicate \in , which in *Being and Event* Badiou refers to as the relation of “belonging”. This relation counts “objects” as pure sets irrespective of what the “objects” in question are. By contrast second-order logic interprets (or “extends”) the pure set-theoretical relations which prevail in first-order logic through statements of quantification of the type “for all $P...$ ” In the first-order logic we inhabit a universe where “everything” is a set, where pure multiplicity reigns, where there is nothing “in” sets but sets of sets of sets... and so on *ad infinitum*. Now, rather than seek to disable second-order logic on the assumption that pure unrestricted thinking is only possible on the basis of a “primitive” relation between sets, the problem here seems to relate more to philosophy’s role in legislating over the domains in which set theory may operate. For Badiou there are four philosophical discourses or “conditions”: love, art, politics, and mathematical science. But having unleashed the power of pure thinking inherent to set theory why then restrict this power to mathematical discourse and ontological situations? Why must “pure”

²¹ This quotation from Pascal is adopted by Badiou in meditation 21 of *Being and Event*.

²² Jean-Luc Nancy, “Philosophy without Conditions” in *Think Again*, pp. 42–43.

²³ Etienne Balibar, “The History of Truth: Alain Badiou in French Philosophy” in *Think Again*.

²⁴ Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 525 (p. 560).

thinking be ordained and restricted by a philosophical conception of set theory? Isn't such a conception to the mutual detriment of both philosophy and set theory?

IV: SPECULATIONS IN REALISM

I am speculating on nothing here that cannot be inferred from Badiou's text and from those instances where the radically un-conditioned and "unbound" nature of philosophy (to quote one of Badiou's favoured expressions) raises its head. Here is one example of what I mean:

In the end, nothing is more corrosive for philosophy than to separate itself from [the mathematized regime of existence], which creates, beyond that which can be empirically tested, the real of a simple possibility, and destines thought to the only thing that matters, its absolute identity with the being that it thinks.²⁵

Let us try to address some of the "corrosive" implications for philosophy of unleashing mathematical thinking on the world. Or, as Badiou quoting Mallarmé puts it, let us "address a 'demand to the world that it adjust its dread to rich and numbered postulates'."²⁶

According to Ray Brassier the "most radical impulsion of [Badiou's] thinking" is its "veritable ontological nihilism".²⁷ At a time when global capitalism is rapidly dispelling the myth that there may yet be some viable alternative to relentless over-consumption, monetary-spiritual indebtedness and environmental destruction, Badiou's idea that being is nothing provides an exercise, not in saving the world or even affirming the "best of all possible worlds", but in thorough-going realism. For Brassier, Badiou belongs to the Enlightenment tradition of philosophy of pushing back the frontiers of human reason, even and especially into areas where human reason may not want to go; in other words, where the consequences of thinking may be damaging for human beings (and for thinking as such?), but where truth can nonetheless shed its light. As Brassier puts it, "Thinking has interests that do not coincide with those of living; indeed, they can and have been pitted against the latter."²⁸

Any number of examples could be used to illustrate this point, although the Paris Commune is the one Badiou often cites from the domain of politics. Here we have an

²⁵ Alain Badiou, "Metaphysics and the Critique of Metaphysics" in *Plé*, 10 (2000), p. 184.

²⁶ *Ibid.* p. 190.

²⁷ Ray Brassier, "L'Anti-Phénomène – Présentation et Disparaître" in B. Besana and O. Feltham eds. *Ecrits Autour de la Pensée d'Alain Badiou*. Paris, L'Harmattan, 2007, p. 64.

²⁸ Ray Brassier, *Nihil Unbound. Philosophy in the Age of Extinction*. Basingstoke, Palgrave MacMillan, 2007, p.9 [All page numbers refer to the unpublished typescript version].

instance of politics which unleashes or “unbinds” pure thinking from the mere interests and necessities of living. We might say that the question dominating the political sequence which ran from 18 March to the final week of May 1871 was far from that of mere survival in the face of overwhelming military odds. What “counted” for the citizens in that short-lived situation was rather nothing but the unrestricted capacities (the infinite multiplicity of their being) that went into building, defending and ultimately dying for an idea. The Commune in this sense was an infinite experiment in collective thinking.²⁹

Although apparently a dissimilar form of multiplicity we could also cite the instance of love in *Romeo and Juliet* which is completely indifferent – again “unbound” – to the established rules of courtship (namely, the respect for family honour). Romeo, in jumping over the wall of the Capulet estate to be with the girl he doesn’t even know is like the child animated by the Pied Piper of Hamelin’s seductive melody, and for whom the family bond has been irreparably broken. *Romeo and Juliet* might in this sense be described as an experiment in individuality (Badiou repeatedly refers to the individuals in a love affair as the subject of “the Two”³⁰).

Here then are examples of pure thinking indifferent and unbound from the necessities and dangers of living, of “being-in-the-world”. But as far as philosophy is concerned we have a problem. Because what such highly creative formulations of individuality lack are the conceptual resources which establish them *as* highly creative formulations of individuality. Their originality as such (Badiou prefers the term “singularity”) as “historical” events is lost once we remind ourselves that what is counted as one by set theory is, in each and every situation, not “objects” but sets. There is no set theoretical means through which the specific elements of *Romeo and Juliet*’s romance in 16th century Verona might be distinguished, not just from a comparable romance also taking place in 16th century Verona, but from any other romance taking place anywhere else in the world – or in any other “possible world” – in time past, present or future. Let us just note in passing that, unlike Badiou, Leibniz did (at least early on in his career) argue the exact opposite: namely, that the individual histories of human civilization, despite its multiple diversity, could be faithfully recorded in books so as to count as one its eternal return, according to the laws of finite arithmetic:

If the human species survives sufficiently long in its present state then a time will come in which even the lives of individuals will recur in detail in the same

²⁹ See Alain Badiou, “The Paris Commune: A Political Declaration on Politics” in *The Communist Hypothesis*, trans. D. Macey and S. Corcoran. London, Verso, 2010.

³⁰ See Alain Badiou, “What is Love ?” in *Umbr(a)* 1, 1996.

circumstances. For example, I myself – living in a city called Hanover, on the river Leine, working on the history of Brunswick, writing letters identical in meaning to the same friends...³¹

For Badiou, unlike the young Leibniz, the infinite multiplicity of any situation makes such description impossible – although Badiou does provide formulas or “prescriptions”, which he writes in set theory notation, for those truth domains or “generic procedures” which concern him (scientific, romantic, political, artistic). But the question here is this: does such prescription, rather than empirical description, succeed in confronting the world of sufficient reason as it really is? Is it really possible to unleash the “dread” of logical postulates on “the world” as such? Consider the following statement:

Intellection is a contingent by-product of evolutionary history.³²

The effect of this statement is somewhat unsettling when read in the context of the evolutionary hierarchies familiar to natural science. Such “evolutionary ladders” – with God at the apex – presume a divine purpose or “plan” for man’s place in the universe on the grand assumption that the human “intellect” is what elevates man above the animals. While not wishing to eschew a human or subjective *capacity* for rationality, and therefore an *epistemic* basis for thought,³³ in the continued absence of any empirical evidence for the exceptional ontological status of the human species as anything more than carbon-based life, such beliefs are mere superstitions. Man *is* matter. And matter is made up of compounds and atomic particles which, in turn, can be adequately formulated using mathematics. From a scientific realist or materialist point of view there is little else to be said about “man”.

For Badiou, mathematics is the discourse in which infinite multiplicity – pure inconsistent “matter” – is inscribed, and which today depends on the eight founding axioms of ZF set theory.³⁴ However, Badiou’s conception of set theory poses a problem for our intuitive understanding of the world. To repeat, there are no empirical objects in set theory, only sets. And so our statement about the contingency of life on earth is, when viewed through Badiou’s optic, presumably no more or less “corrosive” or consequential for scientific discourse than the following statement:

³¹ Leibniz quoted in B. Madison Mount, “The Cantorian Revolution: Alain Badiou on the Philosophy of Set Theory” in *Polygraph*, 17 (2005), p. 77 [Translation modified].

³² Ray Brassier, *ibid.* p. 156.

³³ In passing this is Brassier’s fundamental difference as a self-confessed “rationalist-naturalist” from Badiou, the latter on the contrary upholding that “thinking and being are the same.”

³⁴ *Zermelo-Fraenkel set theory with the axiom of choice* actually contains *nine* axioms and is referred to in shorthand as ZFC.

Not only does God play dice, but he sometimes throws them where they cannot be seen.³⁵

Badiou admits in *Being and Event* that his is “not a thesis about the world but about discourse.”³⁶ Could we infer from this that he wants to “save the world”? Do we detect in this apparent reluctance to engage with the data of empirical science a covert nostalgia for the world of his phenomenological adversaries? A nostalgia which impedes the radical, unbound implications of Badiou’s own philosophy?

One further example of materialist speculation calls for attention here. In *After Finitude*, Quentin Meillassoux embarks on a philosophical critique of the Parmenidian axiom “being and thinking are the same”. What are the real consequences, Meillassoux insists, *for thinking*, in accepting this axiom? In short, that thinking can no longer countenance the “correlation” of primary and secondary qualities, or of things and their phenomena. For Meillassoux the real material stakes of science have for too long been obscured and tethered to redundant, albeit ultimately persuasive categories of metaphysical and alleged “post-metaphysical” philosophy (Meillassoux devotes a chapter to the regressive influence of fideism on metaphysics). The classic example of what Meillassoux terms “correlationism” is founded through Kant’s transcendental idealism according to which things are inconceivable “in themselves” but describable through the *a priori* forms of knowledge. But the mystical and obscurantist disrepute into which Enlightenment philosophy after Kant has fallen (Meillassoux cites Heidegger and Wittgenstein in this respect) is but a trivial aside when it comes to the crux of Meillassoux’s argument, which concerns the objectivity (he prefers the term “factuality”/ *factualité*) of modern science. After all, the “quaint beliefs of contemporary creationists” who defend in all seriousness the Bible’s assertion that God created the Earth 6000 years ago is enough to convince us today that science, not philosophy, is the more institutionally and discursively threatened, and is the one in danger of losing its authoritative status with regard to our understanding of the world.³⁷

Factuality for Meillassoux rests on the scientific discovery of ancestral events which predate the emergence of both terrestrial life and consciousness, or of events relative to the very formation of the Universe itself. The “arche-fossil” – “materials indicating the existence of an ancestral reality or event” – therefore challenges the metaphysical prejudices of modern science, according to which the existence of the Universe is correlated, or only conceivable *in relation to*, the existence of observers. Needless to say

³⁵ Stephen Hawking, unsourced quotation.

³⁶ *Being and Event*, p. 8.

³⁷ Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude. An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier. London, Continuum, 2008.

the challenge posed by ancestry extends far beyond the “all too human” transvaluation of values, or the anthropological horizon of man’s “being-in-the-world”. The factuality which Meillassoux has in mind depends instead on the absolute contingency of Epicurean materialism, or of Chaos as such, the only “in itself” which truly is. Meillassoux’s ultimate challenge is therefore to arrive at a “principle of unreason” or of “thinking” which remains “by necessity” *independent* of the presumed laws of nature. “To assert the opposite, viz., that everything must necessarily perish, would be to assert a proposition that is *still* metaphysical.”³⁸

Like Badiou, Meillassoux’s solution to the inconvenient fact that thinking may be unrelated to the existence of life on earth or of being-in-the-world is mathematics. As a former student of Badiou, Meillassoux follows the latter in drawing the philosophical implications from Cantorian set theory. Although there is insufficient space here for a thorough comparison of their respective positions, it seems that such implications are rather less restricted in scope for Meillassoux than they are for Badiou. For whereas the latter’s mathematico-ontological discourse is quite content to keep “the world” at arm’s length, Meillassoux’s aim is to “pass through the correlationist circle ... which separated thought from the great outdoors, the eternal in-itself, whose being is indifferent to whether or not it is thought.”³⁹ Indeed, on such criteria, Badiou’s application of ZF set theory – whose axiom of foundation forever suspends the thinking of pure multiplicity “on the edge of the void”⁴⁰ – shows the extent of his philosophical conditioning and dependence on the transcendental idealism of Kant. What Meillassoux’s “critique of the Critique” promises, then, by way of radical contrast, is a philosophy freed from metaphysical conservatism, to the mutual benefit of both science and philosophy, mutually strengthened one might say by the realist and corrosive idea that we no longer depend on any world in which to think, and thus no longer on any such correlation.

V: PHILOSOPHY WITHOUT PHILOSOPHY⁴¹

The moment has come to address the point that every reader of this essay will have surely understood by now: “Wherefore art thou Romeo?” is not a “romantic” statement at all, but a line of dialogue from Shakespeare’s most famous tragedy. Its

³⁸ Meillassoux, p. 57.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Let me carefully clarify what I mean by saying that the axiom of foundation is what Badiou terms a “meta-ontological thesis” which institutes a “gap... between ontology and the thought of other presentations, or beings, or non-ontological presentations...” *Being and Event*, p. 188.

⁴¹ Unfortunately there is insufficient space to address the “without-philosophy” (or *sans-philosophie*) of Gilles Grelet despite its influence on the few remaining remarks I am able to offer below.

discursive domain is not love, but art. The bearer of this statement and those of the other statements quoted here, which I used to illustrate the corrosive power of love as a procedure of pure thinking, are not real historical figures. Such individuals never existed; they are pure fictions. Romeo and Juliet exist only through the actors who incarnate the poetic sensibilities of Shakespeare's text. But what of the statements themselves? Might they be legitimately transplanted from the domain for which they were intended – i.e. the domain of art – into that of love? Or are lovers – in lacking the kind of discursive propriety over their statements that never escaped the names Robespierre, Mallarmé or Cantor – forever destined to express their love in mundane and prosaic terms such as, “I love you” and “You mean the world to me”? In any case, what would qualify as “mundane” for a self-reflexive process for which no objective defining criteria exist? And, returning briefly to the language of our realist speculations: *could there ever be love without a world in which to love?*

In *Logics of Worlds*, Badiou's sequel to *Being and Event*, the author introduces the phenomenological criteria, or “transcendental algebra”, by which differences in degree or variations *within* “worlds” might be identified.⁴² “We know from an indisputable source,” Badiou writes

that such and such a world precedes the existence of our species, and that, just like ‘our’ worlds, it stipulated identities and differences, and had the power to deploy the appearing of innumerable beings. This is what Quentin Meillassoux calls ‘the fossil’s argument’: the irrefutable materialist argument that interrupts the idealist (and empiricist) apparatus of ‘consciousness’ and the ‘object’. The world of the dinosaurs existed, it deployed the infinite multiplicity of the being-there of beings, millions of years before it could be a question of a consciousness or a subject, empirical as well as transcendental.⁴³

Now, this statement of approval, far from vouchsafing the evolution of Badiou's philosophical system,⁴⁴ would seem only to reinforce the argument regarding the corrosive power of mathematical thinking vis-à-vis “the world”, and the vacillation which this threat induces in Badiou's philosophical method. Let us recall that philosophy for Badiou is both: 1) *necessarily* defined by the *intrinsic* mathematical discourse of being qua being, i.e. by the pure thinking of set theory – which, as we know, assumes the counting of infinite sets, rather than empirical objects; and 2) *contingent* in terms of the *extrinsic* eventual discourse which conditions philosophy

⁴² Alain Badiou, *Logics of Worlds: Being and Event Vol. 2*, trans. Alberto Toscano. London, Continuum, 2009.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 118-19.

⁴⁴ On this point see Justin Clemens, “Had We But Worlds Enough, And Time, This Absolute Philosopher...” in *Cosmos and History. The Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy*, Vol. 2, no. 1–2 (2006).

through each of its four truth domains. Not only is such discourse non-descriptive but, as we have seen, in the domain of love the indifference of a romantic statement – both in terms of who is speaking and its signification – would even appear to threaten the pure generic status of Love (although of course this is not to deny that the cross-fertilisation of art and love may also *enhance* love, albeit according to certain poetic conceptions).

Is this what Badiou wants? Is the pure corrosive power of his thinking such that its effect is to undermine the experience of love to the point where even the individuals concerned become indifferent to the subject of its Two? Where love *as such* fuses into the exactitude of a pure matheme beyond “bare life”? If so, then Juliet’s suicide in the final act of Shakespeare’s play might be said to bring such thinking to a point of its logical completion: “O, happy dagger!” Juliet declares, “This is thy sheath; there rust, and let me die.”⁴⁵

We could hardly conclude this essay without at least mentioning the discourse which Badiou places at the very heart of his formulations of love, i.e. psychoanalysis. Broadly speaking Badiou follows in the tradition of Jacques Lacan and structuralist psychoanalysis in drawing from the unconscious an ontological framework⁴⁶ through which those aspects of subjectivity traditionally reserved for philosophy, such as ethics and language, might be explored. But as Justin Clemens has noted the price of this integration might be rather threatening for philosophy since “psychoanalysis generates propositions that integrally affect philosophy”, whereas the reverse is not the case.⁴⁷ Presumably this is why Badiou maintains that any philosophy worthy of the name must today first “traverse” the “antiphilosophy” of Lacan.⁴⁸

Badiou confirms the “intimate relation” between love and art, and even extends the argument to the theatre, which is “politics and love, and more generally, the junction of the two [discourses]”. *Romeo and Juliet* is clearly one example of their cross-fertilisation. Now, on the one hand such junctions do indeed seem to unleash the

⁴⁵ Slavoj Žižek has written about suicide as a “real” ethical and political act. In classical Greek drama Žižek makes the point that rather than resulting from an unnatural obsession, Antigone’s suicide marks the authentic fulfillment of her desire. See Slavoj Žižek, *Interrogating the Real*, in R. Butler and S. Stephens eds. London, Continuum, 2006.

⁴⁶ Note that Jacques Lacan was famous for his life-long dismissal of ontology as a branch of philosophy. See Justin Clemens, “Love as Ontology: Psychoanalysis against Philosophy” in C. Kerslake and R. Brassier eds. *Origins and Ends of the Mind: Philosophical Essays on Psychoanalysis*. Leuven, Leuven University Press, 2007.

⁴⁷ Justin Clemens, *ibid.* p. 186.

⁴⁸ Badiou’s reading of Lacan is rather more sophisticated than my caricature suggests. See Adrian Johnston, “This Philosophy Which is Not One: Jean-Claude Milner, Alain Badiou and Lacanian Antiphilosophy” in *S: Journal of the Jan van Eyck Circle for Lacanian Ideology Critique*, 3 (2010).

corrosive power of pure thinking into undiscovered realms and promise us the “reform of philosophical understanding”. “There is no law of love,” Badiou confirms.⁴⁹ But if the freedom of pure thinking – “multiplicity unbound” – extends so far as to hybridize the generic truths that furnish philosophy with its conditions of possibility then, to return to our central question, “Wherefore art thou philosophy?” Why persist with philosophy at all?

Perhaps we should be wary of raising from the dead the metaphysical spectre of the End of Philosophy. Then again, would the end of “philosophy” necessarily spell the end of art, mathematical science, politics and love? Surely such practices would no more disappear “in themselves” with the end of philosophy than would “the world” itself disappear. This is the point that Shakespeare makes in another of his celebrated tragedies when Hamlet remarks that, “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.” However, for his part Badiou argues the exact opposite:

Not only, and contrary to what Hamlet declares, is there nothing in the world which exceeds our philosophical capacity, but there is nothing in our philosophical capacity which could not come to be in the reality of the world.⁵⁰

If philosophy can be said to have a “future” – which is the title for an impressive collection of essays dedicated to Badiou’s work⁵¹ – then it seems to me that the question of this “future philosophy” is located precisely at this juncture, where the corrosive power of thinking pure, unbound multiplicity is unleashed *both* on the world and *within* the philosophy that brings the world into being. For what it’s worth my personal conviction is that Badiou’s intrinsic ontology makes any idea of the future, in these times of s(p)ecular Crisis and intellectual revisionism, seem rather gratuitous and superfluous to the militant task of thinking. I mean that as a compliment.

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⁴⁹ Alain Badiou and Nicolas Truong, *Éloge de l’amour*. Paris, Flammarion, 2009, p. 68.

⁵⁰ Alain Badiou, “Metaphysics and the Critique of Metaphysics”, *ibid.* p.189.

⁵¹ Peter Hallward ed. *Think Again. Alain Badiou and the Future of Philosophy*. London, Continuum, 2004.