

Platonic Meditations: The Work of Alain Badiou

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Across the span of Western thought, infinity has been a notoriously troublesome idea, difficult to pin down, full of paradox, and seemingly connected in some way or other with the divine. But whatever its philosophico-theological obscurities and contradictions, infinity in *mathematics*, as a phenomenon and an effect, is neither difficult to pin down nor hard to come by...it is the founding signified, the crucial ontological term, in contemporary mathematics' description of itself as an infinite hierarchy of infinite sets. — Brian Rotman¹

1. Prefatory Remarks

The work of Alain Badiou is still almost unknown in English-speaking countries, if now almost unavoidable on the continent itself.² Following

¹ B. Rotman, *Ad Infinitum: The Ghost in Turing's Machine: Taking God Out of Mathematics and Putting the Body Back In: An Essay in Corporeal Semiotics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), p. ix.

² To my knowledge, only two of his books and a handful of articles have so far been translated, including: *Manifesto for Philosophy*; *Deleuze: The Clamour of Being*; "Gilles Deleuze, The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque," in C. Boundas and A. Olkowski, eds, *Gilles Deleuze and the Theater of Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 51-65; "On a finally objectless subject," in E. Cadava et al., eds, *Who Comes After the Subject?* (New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 24-32; "What is Love?" in R. Selacl, ed., *Sexuation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000). As an index of Badiou's creeping influence, one could cite the (usually minimal and enigmatic) references to and uses of his work proliferating in the writings of theorists perhaps already better known in the Anglophone world. See, for instance, S. Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 1999),

the publication of his *magnum opus*, *L'être et l'événement*, in 1988, Badiou has continued to elaborate a philosophy which rejects the still-dominant post-Heideggerean belief that the era of Western metaphysics is effectively over.³ As Bruce Fink puts it, "rather than accepting the view that the philosophical project has come to a definitive close in the twentieth century, [Badiou] sets himself the task of defining the *conditions* and aims of a philosophy that is not simply reduced either to its own history...or to a 'rigorous' theoretical approach to *other* disciplines such as art, poetry, science, and psychoanalysis. Philosophy, according to Badiou, has its own proper field and conditions and is anything but dead."⁴

Against the widespread perception that twentieth-century philosophy underwent a "linguistic turn," Badiou affirms that, on the contrary, the century has witnessed the return of *ontology*. The claim that ontology has indeed made such a self-dissimulating "(re)turn" is extremely interesting, and not only because the very *possibility* of the abiding interest of ontology remains enigmatic. As Badiou implies, the question of Being has always necessitated interrogating the status of appearances

esp. chapters 3 and 4, as well as his article "Psychoanalysis in Post-Marxism: The Case of Alain Badiou," *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 97: 2, 1998, 235-261; *Tarrying With the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), p. 4; Keith Ansell Pearson, *Germinal Life: The Difference and Repetition of Deleuze* (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 131-132; Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. M. Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 76, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. D. Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), pp. 24-25, 90, and *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, trans. with intro. D. Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 221; J-F. Lyotard, *Postmodern Fables*, trans. G. van den Abbeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 248; J-L. Nancy, *The Muses*, trans. P. Kamuf (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), p. 110, n. 47. See also P. Hallward, "Generic Sovereignty: the philosophy of Alain Badiou," *Angelaki*, No. 3, Vol. 3, 1998, pp. 87-111, as well as his illuminating interview with Badiou in the same issue, pp. 113-133; Jean-Jacques LeCercle, "Canto, Lacan, Mao, Beckett, *même combat*: The Philosophy of Alain Badiou," *Radical Philosophy* 93, Jan/Feb 1999, pp. 6-13; and *UMBR(a)* 1, 1996, one of the early Anglophone journals to have devoted space to translations and discussions of Badiou's work. My own paper will restrict itself to presenting the more pronounced and insistent motifs of Badiou's work. I would also like to thank Keith Ansell Pearson for his incisive comments on an earlier version of this paper. All translations in the text are my own.

³ A. Badiou, *L'être et l'événement* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1988).

⁴ B. Fink, "Alain Badiou," in *UMBR(a)* 1, 1996, p. 11.

and their relation to the real; hence, even the recent attempted displacement of the opposition "Being/Appearance" by way of an attention to "simulacra" remains thoroughly ontological. Given that an ontology *must* begin by questioning appearances, its techniques and idiolects will always require that it break with the "commonplace," even if it then proceeds towards, or concludes with, a meta-ontological affirmation of the current, trivial fictions of just such a fiction. Within philosophy itself, the dispute regarding Being primarily turns on the question of an appropriate method: that is, should one go the way of language, literature, law, logic, mathematics, intuition, experience, or something else? It is primarily by recourse to *mathematics* — more precisely, post-Cantorian set-theory — that Badiou aims to ground his claim that there is a historically invariant definition of philosophy that can nevertheless confront the multiple eruption of those unprecedented, aleatory worldly events upon which it is philosophy's task to reflect.

Given the sophistication and novelty of his thought and its current obscurity in the Anglophone world — not to mention the available space — my paper will restrict itself to presenting the more pronounced and insistent motifs of Badiou's work. My presentation will thus emphasize the explicitly *topological* slant of his mathematical ontology, which chiefly adumbrates itself through such categories as: situation, state, site, place, point, inhabitant, event, void, and so on.⁵

2. Pernicious Sophistries

But I will begin with Badiou's challenges to the thinkers that he terms "contemporary sophists," among whom he includes — perhaps surprisingly — such apparently disparate writers as Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, Foucault, Derrida, and Lyotard (although Lacan, despite declaring himself to be an "anti-philosopher," is notably exempted from this charge).⁶

⁵ This necessary restriction is already too simple. For, as Badiou points out, since the seventeenth century it has not been possible to situate a mathematical concept simply on one side of the opposition arithmetic/geometry, *Le Nombre et les nombres* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1990), p. 21.

⁶ However, this is also too simple: the evidently related categories of the "sophist" and "anti-philosopher" are not quite the same for Badiou, although the differences between them are complicated and remain somewhat obscure. It also seems that the objects of Badiou's polemics can shift categories as his own work changes. As Sam

Crucially, Badiou's objections here by no means constitute a simple rejection. Indeed, he is extremely sensitive to the force of the "deconstruction of metaphysics," and his own rejoinder thus begins with an affirmation: yes, the era of philosophical theories of Presence is in the process of its interminable completion. What he does not affirm is that philosophy can in any way be identified, as Derrida, for example, has at times seemed to argue, with such a desire (or even with the inevitable failure of such a desire). For Badiou, on the contrary, Presence is an essentially ineradicable trap into which philosophy is persistently liable to fall, when — under the pressure of various historical factors — it mistakes itself for a discourse that has a privileged access to truths, and thereby comes to consider itself the only legitimate tribunal of Being. Such a situation entails what Badiou will name "disaster": however, it is not philosophy as disaster or terror itself (which is, at least Lyotard's early position, for example in *Duchamp's Transformers*), but philosophy's own abdication and ruin.⁷ More precisely, philosophy succumbs to "disaster" when it mistakes itself for a discourse which itself produces truths, and thereby overflows its own proper limits, inducing a triple effect of ecstasy, terror, and sacralisation (this disaster will be explicitly related by Badiou to the generic procedure of love).⁸ For Badiou, philosophy precisely ruptures or interrupts presence, and

Gillespie puts it, "Badiou suggests that it is not philosophy which Lacan argued against as much as an anti-philosophical trend that inhered in philosophy itself," "Subtractive," in *UMBR(a)* 1, 1996, p. 7. See, for instance, Badiou's essay, "Antiphilosophie: Lacan et Platon," in *Conditions* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1992), pp. 306-326, or his (rather strange) take on Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, "Silence, solipsisme, sainteté: L'antiphilosophie de Wittgenstein," in *Barca!*, No. 3 (Nov. 1994), pp. 13-53, in which Badiou defines "antiphilosophy" as relying on three conjoined operations: 1) a linguistic critique of philosophical categories, which destitutes philosophy's pretensions to truth and to systematicity; 2) a stripping-bare of what remains of philosophy beyond its derisory garments (e.g. Nietzsche's discovery of the reactive figure of the priest behind the lie of the "truth"); 3) an appeal to an a- or trans-philosophical act (e.g., Wittgenstein's evident drive to personal sanctity by way of an ethico-aesthetics). See note 10 below.

⁷ Cf. J-F. Lyotard, *Les Transformateurs Duchamp* (Paris: Editions Galilée, 1977), for example: "l'homme de savoir prétend mettre fin à la sophistique au nom du vrai, d'un art de ce qui est réellement vraisemblable, et enfin d'une science. Ici commence la terreur, c'est-à-dire discours et actions commandés par le désir d'avoir le dernier mot et accompagnés de conviction...." pp. 48-49.

⁸ Cf. A. Badiou, *Conditions*, esp. pp. 71-72. See also the essay "Qu'est-ce que l'amour?" in the same volume, which can now be found translated into English as "What is Love?" in both the journal *UMBR(a)* and the anthology *Sexuation*.

philosophy's primary category, Truth — with a capital T — is not a plenitude but rather utterly void. Philosophy neither produces nor pronounces Truth; it *deploys* the category, but does not fill it with any content. As Badiou himself puts it: “who can cite a single philosophical statement of which it makes any sense to say that it is ‘true’?”⁹ But it is also because this *philosophical* relation between the *function* and the *meaning* of Truth is obscured (or tends to be obscured) in the elaboration of philosophy itself that the possibility — and hence the necessity — of this confusion is irreducible.

This point will then come to provide a fundamental dictum for Badiou's philosophical ethics: the philosopher *must* tolerate sophists, for the latter, despite their sarcasms and rhetoric, not only thereby provide the arguments that philosophy necessarily takes as its own, but constantly remind philosophy that the category of Truth is indeed empty.¹⁰ Indeed, perhaps the only error that the sophists succumb to is mistaking the nullity of this category for the fact of its meaningless disintegration or violent fictionality. Against a “sophist” like Derrida, then, Badiou would make at least three prefatory challenges: 1) Philosophy is the interruption of Presence by Truth; it is not the exemplification of the desire for Presence, however one evaluates this desire, and despite the persistent possibility of the confusion of Presence and Truth; 2) Derrida is not simply wrong then about philosophy; however, his own attribution is founded on a historical misrecognition that ultimately remains Romantic at the very moment his own work gestures towards the closure of Romanticism; 3) The crux of this misunderstanding hinges on the philosophical status accorded to poetry, as opposed to certain other practices of thought, notably mathematics.¹¹

⁹ A. Badiou, *Manifeste pour la philosophie* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1989), p. 16.

¹⁰ Cf. Badiou's remarks regarding the relation between sophistic and philosophy in *Conditions*. For example: “Philosophy, or a philosophy, founds its place of thought on *challenges* [recusations] and on *declarations*. In general, the challenge of the sophists and the declaration that there are truths,” p. 255. Very summarily, the sophist claims: 1) that there are no truths, only linguistic techniques and disparate sites of enunciation (language-games); 2) that Being-insofar-as-it-is is thus utterly inaccessible to thought. Nevertheless, the *rhetoric* of the philosopher and the sophist is the same. Cf. also pp. 74-75 of the same volume.

¹¹ In a recent book, Badiou claims that the task facing philosophy today is a “triple destitution” of God: the God of religion, metaphysics and Romantic poetry — “Il est donc impératif, pour s'établir sereinement dans l'élément irréversible de la mort de Dieu, d'en finir avec le motif de la finitude, qui est comme la trace d'une survivance, dans le mouvement qui confie la relève du Dieu de la religion et du Dieu

Indeed, it is this third point that will prove crucial for Badiou: on his account, philosophy is concerned with Truth (capitalized, singular): it produces no truths (small t, plural) of its own. For Badiou, there are only four discourses capable of such a production; they are poetry, love, mathematics, and politics, and are, and will eternally remain, philosophy's sole *conditions*. Each of these generic conditions is an exercise of thought, but they *think* in heterogeneous ways: love is the foundation of sexual difference and the regime of the passions; poetry the creativeness of language; politics involves the collective, “revolutionary” transformations of social situations; and mathematics is the place of the very inscription of Being itself. Philosophy's task is:

to envisage love only according to the truth that weaves itself on the Two of sexuation and only on the Two, but without the tension of pleasure-unpleasure that is sustained by the object of love. To envisage politics as a truth of the infinity of collective situations, as treating *in truth* of this infinite, but without the enthusiasm and sublimity of these situations themselves. To envisage mathematics as the truth of being-multiple in and of the letter, the power of literalisation, but without the intellectual beatitude of the resolved problem. Finally, to envisage the poem as the truth of the sensible presence deployed in rhythm and image, but without the corporeal captation by this rhythm and image.¹²

Philosophy requires all and only these four in order that it itself can *take place* [*avoir lieu*]: its own job is to deploy the purely logical, operational, void category of Truth in order to gather, shelter, and verify that the contemporaneous truths engendered by its four conditions are all “compossible in time.”¹³ Philosophy does this by constructing a “place” which at once enables it to pronounce on Being insofar as its conditions

métaphysique au Dieu du poème,” *Court Traité D'Ontologie Transitoire* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1998), p. 20.

¹² *Conditions*, p. 102.

¹³ Fink glosses this as “true together, simultaneously true, all true in the same historical era,” p. 11. Hence, as he proceeds to point out, “As such, philosophy is *one* discourse among others, not the final or meta-discourse which provides the Truth about the various truths,” pp. 11-12. Or, as Badiou puts it, “Elle [philosophy] configure les procédures génériques, par un accueil, un abri, édifié au regard de leur simultanéité disparate,” *Conditions*, p. 18.

permit, and ensures, by way of the Truth, that none of the conditions' truths are themselves illicitly elevated to the place of Truth itself. Truth, for Badiou, thus at once "signifies a plural state of things (there are heterogeneous truths)" and "the unity of thought."¹⁴ And if philosophy's plural conditions are indeed genuine experiments and experiences of thought, they do not themselves think in categories, concepts, or *Ideas*, for this is the *space* of philosophy alone.¹⁵ For Badiou, philosophy has no *object*; it is simply a particular torsion of an active thought — an *act* of philosophy — which involves the grasping of new possibilities of existence in the course of their production.¹⁶

¹⁴ *Conditions*, p. 65. Or, as Badiou puts it in *L'être et l'événement*, in philosophy there are no truth-procedures or a One-Truth, "but the construction of the concept of the being-multiple of all truth," p. 393.

¹⁵ Badiou will sometimes refer to this philosophical realm as a "space" (*espace*), and sometimes "place" (*lieu*), but tends to prefer the latter, presumably for idiomatic and Mallarméan reasons (e.g., "il y a lieu," "avoir eu lieu," and so on): I am as yet uncertain whether these terms are (or can be) used synonymously, or whether Badiou himself would like to make legitimate contextual or procedural distinctions between them. Incidentally, one can also immediately see why Deleuze and Guattari complain that Badiou thereby returns to "a very old idea of philosophy," *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie?* (Paris: Editions de minuit, 1992), p. 145. Or, as Chris Feik remarked to me in a personal correspondance: "still, Badiou's philosophy is about rounding up the strays."

¹⁶ Cf. A. Badiou, *Abrégé de Métapolitique* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1998), pp. 71-72. As Ansell-Pearson has pointed out to me, this sounds very Deleuzian, especially in regards to "new possibilities of existence." I would essentially agree with this point — given that both Deleuze and Badiou are attempting to think "affirmatively" — but with a double proviso: 1) for Badiou, philosophy *itself* is not involved in the invention and production of such possibilities (this is the realm of its four generic conditions); 2) the modal categories of logic are reconfigured by both in very different ways with very different vocabularies (traditionally, for instance, the "contingent" is defined as "neither impossible nor necessary"). Indeed, if anything links the heterogeneous work in contemporary philosophy (both "continental" and "Anglo-American"), it is the conviction that the possible, necessary, impossible and contingent must all be completely re-thought (c.f. the deconstructionists on "impossibility," Deleuze on the "virtual," Agamben on "potentiality" and the analytic enthusiasm for "counterfactuals"). For Badiou's part, mathematical ontology deals with *actually*-existing multiplicities, and truths — always contingent — involve the production of *impossibilities* (from the point of view of Being) which condition new possibilities, i.e., a truth is both impossible *and* contingent, but the breach in Being it effects makes actual new possibilities; the transition from possible to actual engages the subject in a work of fidelity, etc..... But this is a huge question, whose necessity [*sic.*] I can only acknowledge here.

But this is why Badiou's philosophy proclaims itself Platonic, at least in *form*.¹⁷ Badiou will further hold, against Heidegger and the neo-Heideggereans, that Plato does not mark the originary forgetfulness or repression of Being. On the contrary, it is only with Plato that the question of Being — which is not even, strictly speaking, a *question* — achieves the dignity of the Idea.¹⁸ Hence one of Badiou's fundamental (and memorable) injunctions to contemporary philosophy is to "forget the forgetting of forgetting!"¹⁹ Badiou proposes that the task of philosophy today is not centrally or primarily to speak of Being; rather, it must currently circulate *between* ontology, modern theories of the subject (i.e. psychoanalysis), and its own history, without ever congealing around any one of these poles.²⁰ This third point is absolutely crucial, insofar as it communicates with one of the non-mathematical axioms that founds Badiou's own project: philosophy's place has been destinally fixed from its foundations, ever since Plato's "speculative parricide" of Parmenides.²¹ It is also necessary to mention here that Badiou believes — as did Althusser, whom he often cites on this point — that the effects of philosophy always remain strictly intra-philosophical.

3. A Mathematical Ontology of the Multiple

¹⁷ Cf. *Manifeste pour la philosophie*, p. 78. Furthermore, Badiou's is a "deconstructed" Plato, and bears little resemblance to the pariah figured condemned by various influential contemporary accounts — such as Deleuze's — which, in the wake of Nietzsche, call for "an overturning of Platonism."

¹⁸ With regards to the complexities of the Idea: in an essay entitled "Le (re)tour de la philosophie elle-même," Badiou analyses the interrelated functions of the Platonic 'Good beyond Being,' which designates: 1) beyond *ousia*, that Truth is a limit; 2) that there is no Truth of Truth; and yet 3) cannot completely expunge "an illegitimate function," whereby Truth itself is confounded with Presence, *Conditions*, p. 72. By the way, Being is not, in Badiou's terms, a "question" — precisely because its apparition is founded on a *decision*. If, as Badiou holds, mathematics *is* ontology, Being is neither a question for mathematicians themselves (who ignore Being), nor for philosophers (who rely directly on the mathematicians); on the other hand, if a philosophy decides for a vitalist paradigm, then Being may well appear as a question — *on the basis of this prior decision*.

¹⁹ *Conditions*, p. 59.

²⁰ *L'être et l'événement*, pp. 7-27.

²¹ *Conditions*, p. 277.

But if Badiou's thought is Platonic in form, in content, of course, things are quite different.²² Because there is something else that Badiou must take from the great sophists of the twentieth century: the recognition of the irreducible multiplicity of Being, and the irremediable default, or failure of the One.²³ The problem is this: how is it possible to think multiplicity when metaphysics has always held that, in Leibniz's phrase, "what is not *one* being is not a *being*"? The problem, apparently, of the millenia. Obviously, if any number of contemporary writers might be cited in this context, the qualitative multiplicities of Bergson and his inheritors, notably Deleuze, would certainly be amongst the most prominent. And for almost all these thinkers, multiplicity — correctly understood — is inaccessible to the ill-suited tools of strict logical or mathematical analysis. Indeed, Bergson's work always and everywhere says nothing else: "What is duration within us? A qualitative multiplicity, with no likeness to number; an organic evolution which is yet not an increasing quantity; a pure heterogeneity within which there are no distinct qualities. In a word, the moments of inner duration are not external to one another."²⁴ Furthermore, this antagonistic relation between "mathematics" and "intuition" with regards to the problem of the multiple will continue to govern the hostility between Badiou and Deleuze: "our epistolary controversy of 1992-1994 had the notion of 'multiplicity' as its principal referent. He argued that I confounded 'multiple' and 'number,' whereas I held that it was inconsistent to maintain, in Stoic fashion, a virtual Totality, or what Deleuze called the 'chaosmos.' With sets there is no universal set, neither One nor All."²⁵

In other words, with respect to multiplicity, Badiou could not disagree with Deleuze more. Indeed, much of his own originality

²² Cf. *Manifeste pour la philosophie*, p. 70.

²³ "Ce qu'un philosophe moderne retient de la grande sophistique est le point suivant: l'être est essentiellement multiple," *Manifeste pour la philosophie*, p. 85.

²⁴ H. Bergson, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness* (Kila: Kessinger, n.d.), p. 226.

²⁵ A. Badiou, *Deleuze: "La clameur de l'Être"*, (Paris: Hachette, 1997), p. 11. Cf. also pp. 69-70, and Badiou, "Gilles Deleuze, The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque," and Deleuze and Guattari's own response in *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie?*, pp. 143-144. On the one hand, this dispute seems irreducible (matheme vs. animal, the destitution of the One vs. its transfiguration, exteriority vs. intensity, etc.); on the other hand, both positions teeter on the brink of inverting into their other...I will briefly suggest below how Badiou's position on the subject is symptomatically shaky on precisely the question of the living animal ("the human") that provides its privileged support....

devolves from his deployment of another fundamental axiom: mathematics is the *only* effective ontology.²⁶ Which is not at all to say that Being itself is mathematical, but rather that mathematics crystallizes and literalises what can be said of Being insofar as it is.²⁷ Furthermore, "the question of the exact relation of mathematics to being is...entirely concentrated — for the epoch which is ours — in the axiomatic decision which authorises set-theory."²⁸ In the "dictionary" which concludes *L'être et l'événement*, Badiou will even remark that the development of set theory is, to date, the greatest intellectual effort ever accomplished by humanity!²⁹ But he also speaks elsewhere of one of set-theory's modern rivals in the realm of foundational mathematics, "category theory," developed in the forties by Eilenburg and MacLane. Category theory, a fundamentally intuitionistic geometry which deals with the dynamic interrelationships holding within different *topoi*, is finally for Badiou "a description of possible options for thought. It does not itself constitute such an option. In this sense, it is itself a logic: the virtual logic of ontological options."³⁰

²⁶ Which means that the differences between "logic" and "mathematics" are themselves critical to an understanding of Badiou's work: "a philosophy is today largely decided by the position that it takes on the relation to the two other summits of the triangle, mathematics and logic," *Court Traité D'Ontologie Transitoire* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1998), p. 120. As Badiou points out, the tendency of language-philosophy (whether of a Wittgensteinian or Heideggerian type) is to reduce the differences between the two. Badiou's position in this regard has no doubt been influenced by Lacan's incessant invocation/production of topological figures and mathemes in his re-elaboration of psychoanalysis, if the relative status the two thinkers accord to mathematical formalisation is ultimately very different. On the fraught question of Lacan's relation to mathematics, see, for instance, J-A Miller, "To Interpret the Cause: From Freud to Lacan," in *Newsletter of the Freudian Field*, 3, 1-2, (1989), B. Fink, *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), D. Macey, *Lacan in Contexts* (London: Verso, 1988), and J. Dor, "The Epistemological Status of Lacan's Mathematical Paradigms," in D. Pettigrew and F. Raffoul (eds.), *Disseminating Lacan* (Albany: State University of New York, 1996). Badiou himself dedicates an essay, "Sujet et infini," to a number of apparent contradictions in Lacan's "mathematics," cf. *Conditions*, pp. 274-305. See also his "Complementary note on a contemporary use of Frege" (a discussion of J-A Miller's work), in *Le Nombre et les nombres*, pp. 36-44 (translated as "On a Contemporary Usage of Frege", *UMBR(a)* 2000, pp. 107-115).

²⁷ *L'être et l'événement*, p. 14.

²⁸ *L'être et l'événement*, p. 12.

²⁹ *L'être et l'événement*, p. 536.

³⁰ *Topos: Ou logiques de l'onto-logique: Une introduction pour philosophes. Tome I.*, course-reader, p. 153. And also: "The categorial concept of the universe situates

But why mathematics at all, and, given that, why *this* mathematics in particular? According to Badiou, the effectivity of mathematics as it has been bequeathed to philosophy by Plato has historically received three very different determinations: 1) Mathematics is conceived as the primary pedagogical mode, and a necessary condition for thinking according to first principles; Badiou terms this “the *ontological* mode of the relation of philosophy to mathematics.”³¹ 2) Mathematics is considered as a regional discipline of knowledge in general, and inserted into a hierarchy or taxonomy of sciences which philosophy alone can oversee. This determination is *epistemological*. 3) Mathematics is excluded from philosophical knowledge altogether: this is a *critical* treatment of the relation.³²

As Badiou points out, this third mode is the Romantic philosophical gesture *par excellence*, and remains dominant today. Even the apparent enthusiasm of analytic philosophy and various positivisms for the hard

itself beyond the opposition between classical and non-classical logic. It exhibits a consistency that leaves this opposition undecided. The decision on this point makes us enter into the plurality of universes, into the logical spaces that its generality subsumes,” p. 128. I would suggest that the *mathematics* of set-theory provides the basis for Badiou’s ontology, whereas he treats category-theory as providing a *logic* for subjectivity.

³¹ *Conditions*, p. 157.

³² *Conditions*, p. 158. Hegel’s hostility to mathematics is well-known. As he puts it in the “Preface” to the *Phenomenology*, “In mathematical cognition, insight is an activity external to the thing; it follows that the true thing is altered by it. The means employed, construction and proof, no doubt contain true propositions, but it must none the less be said that the content is false...The evident character of this defective cognition of which mathematics is proud, and on which it plumes itself before philosophy, rests solely on the poverty of its purpose and the defectiveness of its stuff, and is therefore of a kind that philosophy must spurn,” *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller, analysis and foreword. J.N. Findlay (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), sections 43 & 45, p. 25 (sections 42-48 of the Preface are relevant in this context). Paradoxically enough, the Hegelian exclusion of mathematics from philosophy is effected by way of an *identification* or *assimilation*, cf. *Conditions*, pp. 171-175. And see also Badiou’s absolutely stunning reading of Hegel in *L’être et l’événement*, pp. 181-190 (reprinted in *UMBR(a)*, pp. 27-35), which hinges on Hegel’s discussion of quantitative and qualitative infinity in the *Logic*. See Hegel’s *Science of Logic*, trans. A.V. Miller (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press International, 1969), esp. chapter 2, “Determinate Being,” pp. 109-156. As Badiou comments: “the nominal equivalence that [Hegel] proposes between the pure presence of the supersession in the void (good qualitative infinity) and the qualitative concept of quantity (good quantitative infinity) is a trick of the eye...” (“Hegel!” in *UMBR(a)*, p. 34).

sciences, have, since Hegel’s decisive severance of the mathematico-philosophical bond, only “realised the *inversion* of the speculative Romantic gesture.”³³ In its positive dimensions, this gesture is eminently historicist, tending to “oppose Time, life as temporal ecstasy, to the abstract and void eternity of mathematics”; it invariably concludes with the judgement: “if time is the ‘being-there of the concept,’ then mathematics is inferior to this concept.”³⁴ Once again, Badiou’s conception is utterly opposed to a Romanticism, which, in its temporalisation of the One, represents limits as temporal horizons and sutures itself to poetry.³⁵ By contrast, mathematics thinks limits as present-points, and its own place as infinite. Romanticism, for Badiou, thereby reverses the Platonic determination in which the *matheme* is central to thought and poetry is excluded. And the central theme of Romanticism — the interminable meditation on finitude — thereby (whether covertly or explicitly) subjects the concept of infinity to the ultimate dominance of the One. The major problem for Badiou is to find

³³ *Conditions*, p. 159. As Heidegger, in the wake of Hegel writes, “there is need for another logic, but not for the sake of providing more entertaining and appealing classroom material. We need another logic solely because what is called logic is not a logic at all and has nothing in common anymore with philosophy...this is the challenge: logic should change; logic should become philosophical!” *The Metaphysical Foundations of Logic*, trans. M. Heim (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 5. Badiou adds: “It is striking to remark that Heidegger and Carnap disagree on everything, except the idea that we must frequent and activate the end of Metaphysics. What both designate by the name of metaphysics is the classical era of philosophy, in which mathematics and philosophy were still intricately in a general representation of the operations of thought. Carnap wishes to *isolate* the scientific operation, and Heidegger *opposes* to science, the nihilist avatar of metaphysics, a way of thought that rests upon the poem. In this sense, both of them, from different banks, are tributaries of the romantic gesture of disintrication,” *Conditions*, 160. For a more detailed reading of what Badiou will call “the age of poets,” see *Manifeste pour la philosophie*, especially pp. 21-26 and pp. 49-58.

³⁴ *Conditions*, p.161. See also the historico-conceptual discussion of varying attitudes towards infinity (Greek/Scholastic/Galilean/Cantorian) in *L’être et l’événement*, pp. 161-179.

³⁵ Stanley Rosen — another self-confessed Platonist — is another contemporary writer who would substantially agree with Badiou on these points, e.g., “the great revolution of modern philosophy, carried out in the name of certitude against the mixture of superstition and empty speculation practiced by the ancients, ended paradoxically in a philosophy of radical historicity, of poetry rather than of mathematics,” *Nihilism: A Philosophical Essay* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969), xvi. However Rosen’s “return to Plato” differs from Badiou’s, insofar as the former insists on a return to classical *ethics* as a solution to the historicist dilemma.

an exit from Romanticism without succumbing to neoclassical nostalgia (for example, the innumerable contemporary calls for “a return to Kant”); his solution is, as aforementioned, to turn to set-theory. Why?

Post-Cantorian set-theory postulates the actual existence of infinity, and a rigorously defined infinity at that. This is, in fact, universally considered to be Cantor’s fundamental innovation: “It is to the undying credit of Georg Cantor (1845-1918) that, in the face of conflict, both internal and external against apparent paradoxes, popular prejudices, and philosophical dicta (*infinitum actu non datur*) and even in the face of doubts that had been raised by the very greatest mathematicians, he dared this step into the realm of the infinite.”³⁶ Furthermore, set-theory proves that there are infinitely many infinities of different sizes: a unending if immobile sequence of infinities. For Badiou, not only does set-theory thereby strip infinity of all Romantic pathos — infinity is now just a number, not an unachievable destiny — but it also unleashes number from the jurisdiction of the One. Infinity, far from being the forever proximate-distant home of a sacralised presence, is thus rendered utterly banal and indifferent, and mathematics, in an absolutely literal fashion, can be reactivated by radical philosophy as fundamental ontology.³⁷

Hence the justification for Badiou’s polemical call for a “Platonism of the multiple,” which, like Plato’s, will insist on the primacy of the eternal and immutable abstraction of the mathematico-ontological Idea. Furthermore — albeit in a different but obviously related sense — for Badiou a truth commences with an absolute forgetting of time itself; it is an interruption or abolition of time.³⁸ The question thus becomes: what are the self-imposed strictures regimenting philosophy’s own deployment of mathematics? Now, for Plato, mathematics is the only discourse that permits the possibility of a thoroughgoing rupture with

³⁶ F. Hausdorff, *Set Theory*, trans. J.R. Aumann *et al.* (New York: Chelsea Publishing, n.d.), p. 11.

³⁷ By contrast, a thinker such as Levinas — who proselytizes for the infinite as the non-logical overflowing of all limits exemplified in the ethical experience that is the welcome of the face — explicitly considers the idea of infinity to be essentially *theological*. See E. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. A. Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969).

³⁸ That is, “time” considered as the product of established knowledges. In his monograph on Deleuze, Badiou will even suggest that time is “the *being-not-there* of the concept,” *Deleuze*, p. 96.

common opinion, which it violently contests and rebukes.³⁹ Nevertheless, it is still a constrained or restricted rupture, that must in turn be contested by dialectics, which “alone can establish thought in the principle of this discontinuity...It founds a peace of the discontinuous.”⁴⁰ Mathematics is thus located by philosophy between the immediacy of *doxa* and the effortless space of pure thought. As Badiou will put it: “*mathematics is the interval [entre-deux] between truth and the freedom of truth.*”⁴¹ (This determination is not, of course, necessarily of any interest to “working mathematicians” themselves, who, for Badiou, must be ontologists without knowing it.⁴²)

This is a critical delimitation on Badiou’s part: it at once dictates that mathematics functions as a necessary *condition* for philosophy and ensures that philosophy does not mistake itself as merely ancillary to the sciences. This latter error — which would involve what Badiou calls, following Lacan, a “suture” — is the principal way in which philosophy forecloses its own possibilities, forgetting its own proper limits and functions. It thereby *forgets itself*. A suture transpires when “philosophy *delegates* its functions to one or another of its conditions, and thus delivers all thought over to *one* generic procedure. Philosophy then

³⁹ Badiou’s reading is thus utterly opposed not only to the standard interpretations of Plato, but also to every interpretation that would identify mathematics with the dream of a *representation purged of noise*. Michel Serres would be an excellent contemporary example of this tendency. See, for example, the essays collected in *Hermes: Literature, Science, Philosophy*, ed. J.V. Harari and D.F. Bell (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1982). For Badiou, mathematics *represents* nothing — to speak Lacanese, its terms are Real, not Imaginary or Symbolic; furthermore, mathematics is the only possible basis of a rupture of common sense, and is hence genuinely egalitarian *and* aristocratic at the same time. It must be said that Badiou arrives at this insight relatively late in his career; in such pre-*Being and Event* books as *Peut-on penser la politique?* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1985) and *Théorie du sujet* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1982), mathematics is still being invoked in a fundamentally metaphoric sense.

⁴⁰ *Conditions*, p. 169.

⁴¹ *Conditions*, p. 170. For Badiou, classical philosophy everywhere oscillates between the ontological and epistemological treatment of mathematics, that is, the latter is either considered “too violently true to be free, or too violently free (discontinuous) to be absolutely true,” p. 171.

⁴² *L’être et l’événement*, p. 20. Indeed, Badiou will say that “it is of the essence of ontology [*qua* mathematics] to effectuate itself in the reflexive foreclosure of its identity,” *L’être et l’événement*, p. 17. Or, as he also puts it, mathematics — *contra* Heidegger — is at once “the forgetting of itself, and the critique of this forgetting,” p. 486.

effectuates itself in the element of its own suppression to the profit of this procedure.”⁴³

But the ineradicable possibility of this occurring is the reason why Badiou can declare that philosophy does not and cannot always take place. On the contrary, philosophy is a *rare*, or even a *sporadic*, discipline, utterly dependent on the compossibility of its conditions. And, for Badiou, without a return to “Platonism” and hence to mathematics, it would remain impossible today.

4. Nine Axioms and Four Events: Some Details

Set-theory itself is by no means a unified field: there are foundational and anti-foundational varieties, varying numbers and types of axioms depending on one’s inclination, and ramifying paradoxes at every step.⁴⁴ Badiou’s own decision is to opt for a full version of Zermelo-Fraenkel set-theory, with its nine foundational axioms.⁴⁵ These are: Extensionality, Separation, Pairing and Empty Set, Power Set, Union, Infinity, Foundation, Replacement and Choice. Each of these axioms

⁴³ *Manifeste pour la philosophie*, p. 41.

⁴⁴ The obscurities in the following account no doubt derive, at least in part, from the fact that the empirical details of the genesis of set-theory are themselves of immense importance with regard to its elaboration. For instance, though Cantor is credited as the inventor of set-theory in the late nineteenth century, the immediate difficulties that the theory ran into (especially with regards to the so-called “General Comprehension Hypothesis,” or Frege’s axiom of abstraction), derived from its then unaxiomatized presuppositions. Later analyses demonstrated that Cantor’s work implicitly relied on three axioms: extensionality, abstraction, and choice. Following a famous letter of Russell to Frege, which Frege first published as an addendum to the second volume of his *Foundations of Arithmetic* in 1903, it became clear that the axiom of abstraction needed to be refounded, and a number of very famous figures subsequently contributed to set-theory’s redevelopment: Zermelo, Skolem, Fraenkel, Gödel, Von Neumann, Bernays, Ramsey, Cohen, to list only a few. In any case, my own presentation of the mathematics follows Badiou’s reasonably closely, if the necessity to shuttle quickly between mathematics and philosophy may itself require certain minor modifications and simplifications.

⁴⁵ As David Odell notes in an unpublished paper, when set-theory moves into the infinite, “there is no longer any intuition which would distinguish a ‘standard’ set theory from a ‘non-standard’ one, so that we could say that what’s actually true is what is the case in the standard set theory...There are many different Set Theories depending on how these issues are negotiated, and they differ in particular in how ‘fat’ the power sets of infinite sets are deemed to be.”

will be treated by Badiou in a strictly meta-ontological fashion, as if they each functioned to delimit a specific realm of Being and/or dictated the mode of its philosophical treatment. Finally, these axioms are supplemented with an account of Paul Cohen’s technique of “forcing,” which provides Badiou with the self-proclaimed dominant motif of his entire enterprise: the “indiscernible,” or “generic” nature of truths themselves.⁴⁶

Obviously, space limitations preclude any satisfactory account of Badiou’s system, which is both enormous and complicated. In the most summary fashion imaginable, we can quickly state that the aforementioned axioms authorise a number of associated mathematical *dicta*, which include:

- 1) according to the so-called “principle of purity,” there are no *objects* in this set-theory; *everything* is a set.
- 2) These sets are defined on the basis of their elements alone; the central characteristic of ZF is that there is only one relation, that of “belonging-to.” This is thus also a “first-order logic,” the basic principle of which is that the two quantifiers (*universal*, “for all,” and *existential*, “there exists”) bear only on the terms and not on the properties of these terms, i.e. properties cannot have properties in their turn (which would require a second-order logic.)
- 3) This “belonging-to” is not an existential affirmation; that is, it makes no claim as to the being or non-being of the entities with which it operates. Rather, it conditionally *discerns* the limits of arbitrary multiples. No set can belong to itself.
- 4) Every set is not only multiple, but a multiple of multiples. As aforementioned, every situation is infinite for Badiou, and *there is no Universal Set, there is no One, there is no Whole*.
- 5) However — and here is another absolutely crucial point — for a multiple to be registered as a multiple, it has to be *counted as one*. But if such a structuring act of enumeration is the only way in which a multiple can be recognised *as* multiple, it means that the one is reduced to nothing more exalted than a product or result of a count, without any genuine existence of its own. Hence Badiou can declare that the One of Philosophy is not and has never really been an Idea or

⁴⁶ Cf. P.J. Cohen, *Set Theory and the Continuum Hypothesis* (New York: W.A. Benjamin, 1966).

a Being in its own right, but simply the by-product of an *operation* of thought. It is merely a *number*.

- 6) But if everything is a multiple of a multiple, how can it be counted-for-one, when the one does not exist except as a *result*, and hence cannot satisfactorily function as the foundation of a consistent arithmetic? And given that the multiple must be counted in order to be registered as such, it is then surely retroactively undecidable whether it was, strictly speaking, a multiple in the first place. The theory here has recourse to the so-called “empty set” (in French, *ensemble vide*). In Badiou’s words, “the only point of arrest of the multiple, which is always a multiple of multiples (and not a multiple of Ones), can only be the multiple of nothing [*rien*]: the empty set.”⁴⁷ This unique set can be defined in a number of ways, and has a number of peculiar properties; for example, it is a set without members, it is itself a subset of every set including itself, and so on.
- 7) It is thus on the basis of the empty set — signified by a “zero afflicted with the bar of sense” — that infinite infinities can be generated.

But these points are purely introductory. The step into philosophy comes for Badiou when the axioms of set-theory are taken as the literal foundations for an ontology. This step thus requires a shift in terminology. Let us begin with what Badiou calls the “situation,” that is, presentation in general (“situation” ought to be understood here outside of its more familiar Sartrian context). Now if mathematics is itself only concerned with the multiples of multiples that are sets, this can be refigured in ontology as the realm of pure *presentation*.

However, there is immediately a difficulty. For if presentation subsists, without presence, without objects, there is as yet nothing to guarantee its consistency (that is, anything and nothing can be predicated of it, with equal legitimacy). And if there is presentation, this is not necessarily the (self-) presentation of a primordial One. However Being, for Badiou, cannot really be either one or multiple: as aforementioned, a multiple can only be recognised as such when submitted to the exigencies of structure. In his own words, “the multiple is the inevitable predicate of what is structured, because structuration, that is to say the counting-for-one, is an effect.”⁴⁸ So all presentation itself must be, or must have been, structured by an *act* (of enumeration).

⁴⁷ Deleuze, p. 70.

⁴⁸ *L'être et l'événement*, p. 33.

This immemorial act thereby introduces a fissure in presentation; through retroaction, it generates an inconsistent initial multiple — whose existence is, hence, undecidable — at the very moment that it guarantees the final consistency of the structured presentation, i.e., “‘Multiple’ is an effect of the presentation, such as is retroactively apprehended as not-one from the moment that being-one is a result. But ‘multiple’ says also the composition of the count, being the multiple as ‘several-ones’ counted by the action of the structure. There is a multiplicity of inertia, that of presentation, and a multiplicity of composition, which is that of number and of the effect of the structure.”⁴⁹

This imperceptible presentative division is what Badiou will call the nothing (*rien*), which is global, but obviously cannot manifest itself within the situation itself.⁵⁰ It is, necessarily, the “unpresentable of the situation,” a nothing which is not simply a “not” (*pas*) or non-being. An unpresentable which — being everywhere — must somehow affect the presented situation. For Badiou, as it turns out, the unpresentable comes to be presented within the situation as an unlocalisable void point, an “errant cause,” which verifies that “the situation is sutured to being.”⁵¹ It is therefore not exactly *presented*, but presented *in its subtraction*. This is the void of being that mathematics formalises as the empty-set.⁵² The void of being must not, furthermore, be confused with the void category of Truth: the first is, obviously, *ontological*; the second purely *logical*.⁵³ And neither void must be identified, as Lacanians tend to do, with the subject itself.⁵⁴ But it also provides Badiou with another notable

⁴⁹ *L'être et l'événement*, p. 33. Badiou adds that this division between “inertia” and “composition,” of “retroactive obligation” and “anticipatory authorisation,” is a *law* of thought. As regards philosophy itself, Badiou will hold that the ontological situation is “the presentation of presentation...ontology can only be a theory of inconsistent multiplicities insofar as they exist,” p. 36.

⁵⁰ “Toute situation implique le rien de son tout. Mais le rien n'est ni un lieu ni un terme de la situation,” *L'être et l'événement*, p. 67.

⁵¹ “The insistence of the void in-consists as delocalisation,” *L'être et l'événement*, p. 92.

⁵² Hence Badiou can hold that “there is no structure of being,” *L'être et l'événement*, p. 34.

⁵³ See *Conditions*, p. 66.

⁵⁴ This conviction has extreme consequences for the Lacanian doctrine of the subject: as Badiou remarks of Jacques-Alain Miller’s coupling of Frege’s logic with Lacan’s, “The doctrine of Frege would be an *analogon* pertinent to Lacanian logic. For which we have nothing to say since, in this case, the text of Miller *would not be a text on number*. It would not be on two counts: initially because it regards not number, but

polemical motif: philosophy does not deal in *abstractions*, but in *subtractions*. And it thereby also permits the recasting of Heidegger's ontico-ontological difference (between Being and beings) as the difference between the presentation of presentation (inconsistent multiples) and presented-presentation (existent, consistent multiples).

It is for the above reasons that Badiou will identify the empty-set as the proper name of Being, and the axiom of the empty-set as the only genuinely existential axiom of mathematics. The empty set is thus also the name of Being *qua* inconsistency, and its axiom might also be translated into philosophical terms as: "there is a multiple not under the Idea of the multiple."⁵⁵ And, given that it is out of the empty-set that infinite infinities are generated, Badiou's ontology is a genuine atomism, albeit an atomism with a difference. For rather than there being plural atoms of matter that are in constant movement through the void, there is here only one immobile atom — the empty set is unique — and it is woven out of the void itself....

If I have been dealing above with Badiou's meta-ontological translation of set-theory's basic operation, that of belonging, into the problem of presentation and the void, there is another crucial distinction to be made here, which bears on the question of *subsets* and of *inclusion*. This is linked by Badiou to the so-called "power set axiom," which states that, given an arbitrary set, there is a set at hand which is the set of all the subsets of the given set, including the set itself. Every set is a member of its own power set, as is the empty set. (In finite arithmetic, if a set A has n elements, its power set will have 2ⁿ elements, but this quantitative relation — crucially — does not necessarily hold in the infinite.) Now whereas elements *belong to* sets, subsets are governed by the relation of *inclusion*: the power set operation thus turns subsets into elements by producing a set that is demonstrably larger than the initial set.⁵⁶ For Badiou, this relation between a set and its power set can be

rather Frege's doctrine of number (without giving a position on the validity or consistency of that doctrine); and also because it proposes the series of number as a didactic vector for the logic of the signifier, and not as an effective example of the function of the subject's implication in the series of number..." *Le Nombre*, 3.12 (English translation in *UMBR(a)* 2000, p. 111). In fact, for Badiou, a true thought of number is absolutely indifferent to the question of the subject.

⁵⁵ *L'être et l'événement*, p. 81.

⁵⁶ There are two different determinations of number that should be remarked here: cardinals and ordinals. A cardinal is a number that names a set in terms of the latter's sheer size, and two sets are equipollent (equal) if they have the same cardinal number;

rewritten as the relation between *presentation* and the *re-presentation* of this presentation. And whereas he will consider presentation as the regime of pure multiples, structure, counting-for-one — all up, the *situation* — representation involves the re-counting of the initial count: it generates the *state* of the given situation.⁵⁷

There are three possible types of relation between a presentation and its state: 1) *singularity* (an element is presented but not represented); 2) *normality* (if an element is presented, it is also represented: for Badiou, this is the schema of a homogeneous nature, and is founded on the mathematical construction of ordinal numbers); 3) *excrescence* (a term is represented but not presented). Unfortunately, there is no space here to expand on this critical question of the relations between presentation and representation: for Badiou, there are three major philosophical ways in which mathematics-philosophy has attempted to limit or define the play between presentation and representation: 1) *constructibility*, i.e. if something cannot be said by or in a well-formed language, it doesn't exist (e.g. Leibniz, Gödel); 2) *genericity*, i.e. truth is indiscernable and commands the state of representation, thus functioning only in its anonymous subtraction (e.g. Rousseau, Beckett and Cohen); 3) *transcendence*, i.e. thought affirms an ascending hierarchy of Being (e.g. theology). Badiou also, somewhat ambiguously, designates a fourth way, "transversal" to these, which is "historial," and associated by him with the names of Marx and Freud.

ordinal numbers are sets well-ordered by the epsilon relation. In the finite, ordinals and cardinals coincide, but diverge in the realm of the infinite. The first infinite ordinal is represented as ω . But it is also a cardinal, because every smaller ordinal is, by definition, not equipollent to it. As a cardinal it is called Aleph-zero. However ($\omega+1$) is equipollent to ω itself, and so they share the same cardinal number (as does every other ordinal produced arithmetically from ω). Now Cantor's Theorem shows that no set is equipollent to the number of its subsets, and so the power set of ω has larger cardinality than Aleph-zero. However, it is not necessarily a larger cardinal, because we are not entitled to say that every set corresponds to some cardinal unless the Axiom of Choice is at hand (which ensures cardinal comparability). The continuum hypothesis will in fact propose that the power set of aleph-zero is equal to aleph-one (the generalised version will put the power set of aleph-n as equal to aleph-n+1). Cohen has proven that the continuum hypothesis and the Axiom of Choice are independent of ZF.

⁵⁷ Badiou then re-poses his terms: the "one" is the "nonexistent" result of structure; "unicity" a predicate of the multiple thereby counted; "putting-in-one" is a (second) counting of the initial count, i.e. its representation.

For Badiou, set-theory thus founds a rigorous ontology which can quantify and compare various infinities, and effect various operations on the diverse multiples presented by the situation or represented by its state. However — and this is, as aforementioned, the central motif and *summa* of Badiou's system — such an ontology finds itself exceeded and rebuked by the paradoxes of event-truths. An event can be either scientific, amorous, political, or artistic. An event begins locally, in what Badiou will call a "site" (or point-site at the edge of the void);⁵⁸ it effects a completely unprecedented transformation in the situation; it is therefore an aleatory interruption and an absolute beginning; it gives rise to a *truth* which is an infinite process, and hence finally *indiscernable* from within the situation itself; such a truth is thus — as for Lacan, but in a different sense — a hole in knowledge. To use Badiou's terminology, the event, intervention, and fidelity are the external qualities on the side of *truth*, whereas precise nomination in an established language is the hallmark of encyclopaedic *knowledge*. And whereas auto-belonging is strictly prohibited by the axioms of set-theory, the event has the singular property of belonging to itself.⁵⁹ This property ensures that "there is no acceptable ontological matrix of the event," and that, "of the event, ontology has nothing to say."⁶⁰ Being and truth are originally disjunct, and the event is undecidable.

But a subject can still — in fact, it must — *intervene*, in a fashion that is at once "illegal" and disruptive (the subject cannot construct a viable justification for its own decisions in this regard), and which, despite its very illegality, ultimately ensures the restitution of order. Such an intervention *decides* whether a putative event has in fact taken place, that is, if it belongs to the situation at hand.⁶¹ If it decides affirmatively, the

⁵⁸ The event-*site* is always in a situation, but there are no event-*situations*.

⁵⁹ Badiou will explicitly un-chain the event from the Axiom of Foundation (or Regularity), which states that, given any non-empty set A there is a member b of A such that their intersection is empty, $A \cap b = \emptyset$, hence $A \notin A$ because then the set $\{A\}$ would have no foundation, since $A \in A \cap \{A\}$. But Badiou insists that an event has absolutely no foundation in Being.

⁶⁰ *L'être et l'événement*, p. 212.

⁶¹ "The intervention's initial operation is to make a name of an unrepresented element of the site in order to qualify the event by which this site is the site," *L'être et l'événement*, p. 226. The intervention is also linked both to the Axiom of Choice and to the Empty-Set/Pair Set axiom, given that the sets the intervention "chooses" and upon which it decides cannot be effectively discerned (e.g. Russell's paradox of the left sock), and given that it touches upon a foundational "Two without concept," i.e. an unrepresented or absent element *and* its supernumerary name. An intervention is

event is determined as an uncanalisable excess and indexed to a supplementary, arbitrary signifier (the "name" of the event); if negatively, there has been no event and nothing has taken place. Either way, the event is necessarily annulled *as* event, but an affirmative intervention nevertheless thereby holds out the possibility that there is a being of truth that is not truth itself, and that being and truth — if disjunct — are still *compatible*.⁶² A subject can, at best, "force" a veridical knowledge of a truth, but the truth "itself" — being infinite and indiscernible — will necessarily always elude it. Or, to cite Badiou's own rather lapidary "definition": "that which decides an undecidable from the point of an indiscernible."⁶³ The affirmative subjective moment involves, moreover, a difficult continuing engagement with the vanished event; Badiou names this subjective work of incessant material questioning "fidelity."⁶⁴ Slavoj Žižek has glossed its complex structure thus:

For Badiou (in his anti-Platonic mode, despite his love of Plato), Necessity is a category of veracity, of the order of Being, while Truth is inherently contingent, it can occur or not.... For Badiou, Truth itself is a theologico-political notion: theological in so far as religious revelation is the unavowed paradigm of his notion of the Truth-Event; political because Truth is not a state to be perceived by means of a neutral intuition, but a matter of (ultimately political) engagement. Consequently, for Badiou, subjectivization designates the event of Truth that disrupts the closure of the hegemonic ideological domain and/or the existing social edifice (the Order of Being)...⁶⁵

subtracted from the law of the "counting-for-one." Hence, even if an intervention decisively *decides*, it itself remains undecidable, and another intervention would be required to pronounce on the first: an event can thus never be apodictically assimilated to, or subsumed under, the heading of being.

⁶² *L'être et l'événement*, p. 391.

⁶³ *L'être et l'événement*, p. 445.

⁶⁴ As Badiou puts it, "Being faithful to an event is to move (oneself) in the situation that this event has supplemented, in *thinking* (but all thought is a practice, a putting to the test) the situation 'according' to the event," *L'éthique: Essai sur la conscience du Mal* (Paris: Hatier, 1993), p. 38.

⁶⁵ Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, p. 183. It is worth noting here that Žižek's translation of Badiou's vocabulary into Žižek's own terms is already (to my mind, illicitly) attempting to evade the *mathematical* foundations of Badiou's thought (I would add that Žižek's claims, as always, are suggestive but rely very heavily on chains of

There is unfortunately no space here to discuss Badiou's metaontological reformulation of Cohen's technical innovation of "forcing": suffice it to say that the necessarily belated ontological enquiries upon the singularity of an indiscernable-generic truth by way of strings of conditions is integrally linked by Badiou to his reformulation of the subject of philosophy and its possible knowledge of this truth. The subject is, for Badiou, neither substance, nor constituting agency, nor recurrent structural exigency, but rather an evanescent local effect, i.e., "the subject is nothing other, in its being, than a truth grasped at its pure point; it is a vanishing quantity of truth, a differential eclipse of its uncompletable infinity. This vanishing is the in-between of the undecidability of the event and the indiscernability of truth."⁶⁶ A subject, like a truth, is *rare*, and takes place under the aegis of *one* generic procedure: it is always the subject of art, politics, science *or* love. A subject is thus always absolutely singular in its production of *matter*, but only thinkable *formally* according to its genre.

Badiou's "subject" makes truths true, precisely by "forcing" the present indiscernibility of truth into being *qua* knowledge: the subject is the singular-in-finite of a (one) point-of-truth, a moment in a truth's sporadic becoming. A truth is thus *thought* as a sequence or concatenation of those subjects who produce themselves as vanishing quantities of that truth: each subject as a singular "idea," and an idea (or, again, an idea-being) for Badiou is the subject itself insofar as it can be registered by philosophy. "Fidelity" to an event therefore means that the subjects produced in the wake of the "same" event can — even *must* — be radically *different*, and an integral component of philosophical practice is the construction of a site of Truth in which the (often

analogies that obliterate specific logical, terminological and rhetorical differences). Certainly, Žižek's remarks with regards to the possible theologico-political aspects of Badiou's notion of truth deserve further exploration (see also Lecercle on this point), but Žižek ignores Badiou's very careful formalisations of the numericity of the political procedure and therefore reduces the generic specificity of subjects, e.g. "What singularises the political procedure is that it goes from infinity to the 1...In this sense...politics is the inverse of love. Or: love begins there where politics finishes," A. Badiou, *Abrégé de Métapolitique* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1998), p. 166.

⁶⁶ *Conditions*, p. 286. Cf. the entire chapter "Theory of the Subject," in *L'être et l'événement*, pp. 429-445.

antagonistic or heterogeneous) disparity of subjects can be configured as belonging, precisely, to the same sequence of an event-truth.

Being, for Badiou, is fundamentally knowable; its paradigm is mathematical literalisation. Truths, on the other hand, are precisely indiscernible; they are not Being, but that which participates in the transformation of Being, by way of the subjective super-addition of infinite strings of what was hitherto a sort of dark matter. This is also why truths begin as an abolition of time: each truth has its own singular temporality, which is the complex rhythm produced by those spectral beat-punctuations that are its subjects. "Time" is thus itself irreducibly multiple, infinite, sporadic — and constantly reinvented. And because there is no Universal Time, no God, no Whole, in which every time would ultimately find its Time, the "time" of a truth can only be expressed oxymoronically: to use a phrase that is perhaps not Badiou's, a truth is both an "infinite process" *and* an "immortal transience." A truth *qua* truth, can only be subjectively inscribed in actuality by forcing it into a future-perfect without present or presence. In Badiou's untotalisable universe, "death" is therefore a senseless denomination. Badiou has produced, in other words, what might be called a techno-philosophy of the infinities....

5. The Lighthouse of the Bride

Despite the necessarily truncated account of Badiou's work offered here, his radical differences from such contemporary philosophers as Derrida and Deleuze should now be evident. Badiou's hostility to the diagnosis of "nihilism," his return to Plato and to pure mathematics, his expulsion of poetry from the domain of philosophical effectivity, his reformulation of the subject as a vanishing point in an infinite process of truth, the extremely specialised, technical (and hence difficult) nature of his work, etc., all place him at some distance from dominant Romantic trends. Furthermore, Badiou's anti-Romantic strain does not mean that he gives up on emancipatory or radical politics, nor does he fall back on notions of a professional or technical *ethics* to ground his declarations. On the contrary — and precisely to the extent that Badiou can mobilise the definitional precision of mathematics to effect separations between, say, art and politics — he can successfully evade the Romantic aestheticising that invariably concludes by attempting to re-fold every distinction into every other.

If I have any objections to Badiou's work, they are extremely tentative and perhaps even illicitly aestheticising in their turn. For instance, it is tempting to suggest that Badiou has oversimplified the work of a number of the figures whom he criticises — to the extent that some of his arguments begin to look like self-serving sophistic contortions in their own right. Although Derrida, for instance, is merely a minor figure in Badiou's demonology, he evidently remains the single most influential and notorious contemporary French thinker in the English speaking world today.⁶⁷ Indeed, I believe a comparative study of their methods would be of the greatest interest, given that Derrida's work still poses the greatest problems for philosophy: if Badiou admires Lacan, and certainly follows the latter in his insistence on the continuing viability of the concept of the subject, not to mention the foundational role of the *matheme*, and if his work opposes itself to that of Deleuze at every point (e.g. *matheme* versus *animal*, the eternal immobility of the Idea against a nomadology of forces, and so on), Derrida's arguments cannot be so easily opposed, extended, or inverted. For despite the very prevalent misreading of deconstruction as simply the undoing of binaries, the overcoming of metaphysics *qua* irreducible desire for Presence, and the death of the subject, deconstruction is rather the persistent demonstration that metaphysics and philosophy are never quite the same, that "Plato" is for instance the retroactive invention of a tradition that thereby produces its own intervention as a betrayal, that even the literalisations of formal logic betray their own systematicity through this literalisation itself, etc. Certainly, Derrida thinks of metaphysics as governed by a necessarily frustrated desire for presence, and that philosophy's pretensions in this regard can be ruptured by recourse to literature; Badiou, on the other hand, considers that the desire for presence is *the* persistent threat to genuine philosophizing, and derives from its suturing to one or another of its conditions — this situation can currently only be contested by way of the *matheme*. For

⁶⁷ In an extremely strange footnote to *Being and Event*, in which he speaks of his contemporaries, Badiou writes: "En ce qui concerne le réquisit ontologique et l'interprétation de Heidegger, il faut certainement nommer J. Derrida. Je me sens sans doute plus proche de ceux qui, après lui, ont entrepris de *délimiter* Heidegger en le questionnant aussi du point de son intolérable silence sur l'extermination nazie des juifs d'Europe, et qui cherchent au fond à lier le souci de la politique à l'ouverture de l'expérience poétique. Je nomme donc J.-L. Nancy, et P. Lacoue-Labarthe," p. 522. Badiou does not treat the others named here (e.g. Deleuze, Lyotard, Bouveresse, Rancière, etc.) so grudgingly.

Derrida, *both* subject and object are dissolved and reinstalled in the play of *différance*; for Badiou, the Platonic "errancy of being" can be refigured by examining how the floating difference in cardinality is decided between an infinite set and its subsets, all of which are woven from the unlocalisable void of the empty set; hence the subject can still be saved, if one gives up the object. But these already very complex antagonisms ought not to hide their only apparently minor empirical complicities: a fondness for Mallarmé; a belief that philosophy finds itself on the attempted mastery of limits (even if they evaluate this mastery differently); a rejection of hermeneutics; an affirmation of the priority of trans-empirical literalisations as the auto-foundation of Being (whether this is considered mathematically or poetically); an emphasis on irreducible multiplicity, and so on.

This *différend* returns us ineluctably to the problem posed by Badiou's account of generic subjectivity. As stated above, the subject is not simply a new version of a human individual: on the contrary, Badiou will take a great deal of care to explain, say, that the "subjects of the art genre" are works of art themselves (and not the human animals who supposedly create them). There is nothing psychological about Badiou's subject and, in this sense, his philosophy is one of the most extreme of all anti-humanisms. On the other hand — as always — *techno* can become *retro* in a single beat. For Badiou is then left with such apparently fatuous, even idiotic problems as: can animals create works of art (*à la* monkeys on a keyboard)? Engage in science (other than as experimental subjects)? Fall in love (didn't the Greeks believe in cross-species love)? Do politics (termites and seals)? Badiou's answer is a definite No! — if human beings are not in and of themselves subjects, only a human animal is capable of being *iced* — transfixed and transfigured — by those events that trigger the very truth-procedures which subjects play their part in constituting.⁶⁸ As far as I am concerned, this is presently the most underworked aspect of Badiou's project, and it reintroduces so many of the problems that his work is directed against: what, for instance, does it mean for an "animal of the human species" to be the only-animal-with-the-potential-for-truth?⁶⁹ On Badiou's account,

⁶⁸ Who can be a subject? "'Quelqu'un' est un animal de l'espèce humaine, ce type de multiple particulier que *les savoirs établis* désignent comme appartenant à l'espèce," *L'éthique*, p. 41. My emphasis.

⁶⁹ This is where the question of vitalism raises its ugly head again. Although the pertinent research on this topic is enormous, permit me to cite here my own collection of poems, entitled *Ten thousand fucking monkeys* (Melbourne: Workshop 3000,

could a “human animal” live its entire “life” without ever becoming a subject — for example, by solely and happily pursuing its own self-interest in the realms of opinion?⁷⁰ Unlike many other philosophers, the acquisition of human language for Badiou is not a sufficient condition for or evidence of subjectivity; indeed, Badiou’s hostility towards the “linguistic turn” requires that he break with every such supposition (although the role of nomination of course remains integral to the event-truth nexus). But if “death” has nothing to do with truth for Badiou, he is still left with the problem of “life”... about which he *necessarily* has very little to say, for his philosophy then runs the risk of inverting into its primary adversary — vitalism.

But this difficulty also communicates with another problem for Badiou: that of accounting for what I will summarily designate as *the difference of forces*. Whereas thinkers as different as Deleuze and Harold Bloom have no difficulty in producing theories that describe, in their own ways, the processes of domination, captivation, sovereignty, Badiou is compelled to ignore or reduce such processes (this is linked with his anathema towards Nietzsche). And Badiou typically does so in two ways: 1) by working at such a level of abstraction that what precisely becomes obscured are the specificities of events, sites, situations, as if

1999), which turns on precisely this question (the apparent spelling mistake in the title is deliberate). Giorgio Agamben has not hesitated to mark this point as well, notably in an essay dedicated to Gilles Deleuze, the greatest modern philosophical vitalist: “Alain Badiou, who is certainly one of the most interesting philosophers of the generation immediately following Foucault and Deleuze, still conceives of the subject on the basis of a contingent encounter with truth, leaving aside the living being as ‘the animal of the human species,’ as a mere support for this encounter,” *Potentialities*, p. 221. And see also Agamben’s remarks in *The Coming Community*, on the twentieth-century predilection for set-theory as deriving directly from the grammatical specificity of the proper name: “While the network of concepts continually introduces synonymous relations, the idea is that which intervenes every time to shatter the pretense of absoluteness in these relations, showing their inconsistency. *Whatever* does not therefore mean only (in the words of Alain Badiou) ‘subtracted from the authority of language, without any possible denomination, indiscernible’; it means more exactly that which, holding itself in simple homonymy, in pure being-called, is precisely and only for this reason unnameable: the being-in-language of the non-linguistic,” p. 76. Finally — and perhaps most devastatingly for Badiou’s project — Agamben argues in *Homo Sacer* that Badiou’s “event” (the very foundations of Badiou’s anti-statist project) is in fact the originary operation of *the State itself!*

⁷⁰ After all, “Rapporté à sa simple nature, l’animal humain doit être logé à la même enseigne que ses compagnons biologiques,” *L’éthique*, p. xx.

what mattered for philosophy was merely *that* events take place (Hallward, for instance, speaks of Badiou’s “‘extraordinarily vague’ notion of a situation”⁷¹); 2) the events that Badiou recognises are actually uncontroversial: the French Revolution, Mallarmé, the love of Abelard and Heloise, etc.⁷² But, then, how could an essentially quantitative philosophy such as Badiou’s speak compellingly of qualitative difference? After all, a “relation” for Badiou is only a pure multiple with a name-number. For Badiou, an event must be infinitely “separated” and “weak” (annulled, cancelled, foreclosed, undecidable), and a subject-truth essentially incomparable to others, beyond relation (i.e., to which no name-number can presently be assigned). Yet subjects, it seems, can attempt to be faithful to two different events simultaneously. Badiou’s use of the verb “to force” — playing on a variety of technical significations of the term — is not enough to resolve the difficulty. For surely an integral aspect of the singularity of truths depends on their *relative influence within a sequence and to the cross-overs they might make with other, previously unrelated sequences* — the ur-event of Shakespeare, as Bloom says, makes possible every subsequent writer in English; likewise, for Badiou, Rousseau establishes the modern concept of politics. Is there, in other words, a covert hierarchy of events, subjects and truths, linked to their forcefulness? Badiou, for instance, will remark in passing that there are “big” and “little” events, but it would be absurd to suggest that he simply translates force into number.

Which makes one wonder: if Badiou’s work is indeed anti-constructivist, that is, it attempts to unfound the state as the ultimate guarantor of meaning, it also recognises that every truth must come into conflict with the situation and the state *at some point*, and it is precisely the evidence of such conflict that enables the possible activity of a truth

⁷¹ Hallward, “Generic Sovereignty,” p. 105. Indeed, Hallward makes a great deal of the problem of the *specific* for Badiou.

⁷² Lecerle makes some rather snide remarks about precisely this aspect of Badiou: “either the radical novelty and exceptionality of the event is preserved, and there is no way of proving that the sect who recently committed mass suicide in Los Angeles to join the crew of a UFO were not faithful to a process of truth, or the eventuality of the event will be assured, but only in terms of an established tradition...,” pp. 12-13. Against Lecerle, Badiou might quite rightly object that the alien suicides were being faithful to a truth-process (even if they succumbed to disaster and evil by treating it as a moment of presence rather than voiding); however, this doesn’t evade the problem of the *force* of any particular truth...

to be discerned within a situation.⁷³ A truth *must* establish and inscribe its name in the field of knowledge or it will forever remain a non-being — that is, a thing with neither truth nor being. If such a thing were possible within Badiou's system, it would then run very close to what he denounces as the apathy of opinion and simulacral terror, without necessarily being either. Badiou perhaps has a problem with the various species of non-being that play about the borders of his work: what his work, by definition, either interdicts or renders im-possible is a truth-without-effects. Perhaps one could then say that what is missed in the trajectory of an event-truth from undecidability to indiscernibility to unnameability is, precisely, *imperceptibility*.

Furthermore, there are various slippages in Badiou's terminology that are at once minor, and yet seem intensely fraught. For example, with respect to his generic categories, Badiou will sometimes refer to "mathematics" and sometimes to "science," sometimes to "art" and sometimes to "poetry," as if these terms were straightforwardly substitutable. This procedure immediately provokes such questions as: Is the poem the exemplary instance of, or model for, art? A synecdoche for the entire field of aesthetic production? Or simply a handy example? What of painting, of which Plato equally has things to say and judgments to make, and often at the same moments that the *Republic* elaborates itself on the basis of metaphors that consistently compare the philosopher's task to that of the artist (this is a situation, moreover, which Badiou himself alludes to)? And what of music? (Badiou, for instance, often mentions Schoenberg).

But there are also more profound, if no doubt related, problems which have to do with Badiou's own choice of authoritative texts. For example: why are *these* events of modernity (Lacan, set-theory) determining? Why *this* form of set-theory? — for there are many versions of set-theory, including anti-foundational varieties which *do not* rely on the empty set. One might further note with regards to Badiou's favoured poets (Hölderlin, Rimbaud, Mallarmé, Trakl, Pessoa, Mandelstam, Celan) that this is an entirely unsurprising philosopher's choice (perhaps that's the point), and these are among the most traditional philosophical poets. One

⁷³ "Une vérité 'troue' les savoirs, elle leur est hétérogène, mais elle est aussi la seule source connue de savoirs nouveaux. On dira que la vérité *force* des savoirs. Le verbe *forcer* indique que la puissance d'une vérité étant celle d'une rupture....Si une vérité n'est jamais comme telle communicable, elle implique, à distance d'elle-même, de puissants remaniements des formes et des référents de la communication," *L'éthique*, p. 62.

might well agree with Badiou that those named take on the destiny of thought in the Romantic era given philosophy's own suturing to its poetic condition, but surely there are others, of at least equal interest in this regard: Wordsworth, Coleridge, Robert Browning, Wallace Stevens, Walt Whitman, Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, etc. Perhaps this is a moment when philosophy's in-discrimination of its others, and its own socio-historical localisation and determinations of personal taste are most evident. For Badiou to denominate his selection a "decision" of the ontology is, in any case, completely unsatisfactory. Finally, as David Odell has also pointed out, the infinities of set-theory are, rigorously considered, "an epistemological problem masquerading as an ontological one," and that "irony is irreducible in the infinite."⁷⁴ And is not irony the *Romantic trope par excellence*...?

But let me now conclude this already truncated account in the terms of the topological theme with which I began: Badiou delineates for philosophy a precarious place that, confronting a situation and a state of Being, finds itself at the edge of the unlocalisable "black-grey" void and — affronted by the undecidability of events and the disparity of their sites — faithfully attempts to ensure their heterogeneous unity in thought. For Badiou, it is finally only by way of such a painstaking "work of fidelity" to events that philosophy can't go on, must go on, will go on....

⁷⁴ Personal correspondence.