

Cantor, Lacan, Mao, Beckett, *même combat*

The philosophy of Alain Badiou

JEAN-JACQUES LECERCLE

There is one thing on which, nowadays, philosophers agree, beyond their infinite differences about every other thing: the era of philosophical systems belongs to the past. It would take a heroic courage bordering on irresponsibility to put on Hegel's shoes and offer a systematic account of the world. This is clearly impossible, either because philosophy is at an end (this is the continental argument) or because it is a humble quasi-scientific discipline, requiring specialized essays rather than the 500-page *magnum opus* (this is the analytic argument). After the belated attempts by Heidegger and Sartre, titles like *Being and...* are thought no longer to be the order of the day. But they are, and there is at least one philosopher who is still a builder of systems: Alain Badiou, whose *magnum opus* is aptly entitled *L'Être et l'événement*.

1. Gosky patties

At first sight, Badiou's work sounds like a recipe for Edward Lear's gosky patties. Here is a philosopher who offers a synthesis of mathematical set theory, Lacanian psychoanalysis, Maoist politics, and the poetics of Mallarmé, Rimbaud and Samuel Beckett. And who, out of this apparent hodge-podge, offers an account that is extraordinarily coherent – 'continental' philosophy with a vengeance, in its full assertive glory, without a hint of compromise. No niggardly technical solutions to limited problems in the philosophy of mind or of language for him, but a vista of being-qua-being, a vast system, embracing everything, from ontology to ethics, from politics to aesthetics. With Badiou, the type of philosophy that flourished from Plato to Hegel is with us again: in a rather touching footnote, he announces a sequel to *L'Être et l'événement*, which will be to its predecessor what the *Phenomenology of Spirit* was to the *Science of Logic*.

The scope and impressiveness of this philosophical range reflects the chequered career of the philosopher. Badiou, who was born in 1937, has always taught philosophy at one of the Paris universities (Saint-Denis, formerly at Vincennes – the *avant-garde* university for supporters of the 1968 movement). But he has also been many other things: an admirer of Sartre in his early days, a follower of Althusser in the early 1960s, the leader of an extreme Maoist sect in the 1970s, but also a novelist (*Almagestes*, 1964; *Portulans*, 1967), a playwright (*Ahmed le subtil*, 1994) and even the author of the libretto of an opera (*L'Echarpe rouge*, 1979). In other words, a complete philosopher, involved in politics and in art, as was his first master, Sartre.

Badiou's philosophical works, which are numerous, can be divided into two categories: before and after the *magnum opus*, which was published in 1988. Before, we find works of Marxist-Leninist philosophy (*Le Concept de modèle*, 1969, published under the aegis of Althusser; *Théorie de la contradiction*, 1975 – an apt title, as it belongs to his Maoist phase), and first attempts at constructing an original system (*Théorie du sujet*, 1982, now treated as a failed forerunner, or *Peut-on penser la politique*, 1985, a first partial sketch of the great things that were to come). After, we have a number of shorter and more accessible books, collections of essays or local treatments, where the system is presupposed, applied but also pedagogically expounded: *Manifeste pour la philosophie* (1989), *Le Nombre et les nombres* (1990), *Conditions* (1992), *L'Éthique* (1993), *Beckett* (1995), *Saint-Paul* (1998). Badiou is a prolific writer: no fewer than three books are announced for 1999. One can only recommend, as a first approach to a philosophical thought that is complex and difficult, the short book

on 'ethics', for even Badiou can write for sixth-formers. Of course, the reader cannot dispense with tackling the monument on which the system is inscribed: *L'Être et l'événement* is a 550-page monster of a book, comprising thirty-four 'meditations' – undoubtedly one of the major works of French philosophy in the last twenty years, and one which should be promptly translated into English.

2. System

There is no point in a historical treatment of Badiou's thought, which is explicitly anti-historicist. The only way is to tackle the system; a rather formidable task, except that Badiou's style is entirely clear and explicit, despite the difficulty of the thought.

The best way to begin is with a description of those philosophers Badiou considers to be his opponents. Contrary to expectations, they are not the analytic Anglo-Saxon philosophers (he quietly condemns their positivist attachment to science, and believes he can out-logic them any day) but those he calls the modern Sophists, philosophers who defend one of the three following theses (and sometimes all three at once): (1) philosophy is nearing its end, it has exhausted its potential, the only possible philosophical posture today is to celebrate or regret its demise; (2) philosophy has undergone a linguistic turn (for Badiou, the arch-Sophist is Wittgenstein); (3) philosophy is about meanings, it is a kind of glorified hermeneutics (for him, the greatest of these philosophical hermeneutists is Heidegger).

Those Sophists (the category includes practically every single modern philosopher) are radically wrong. Against them, Badiou will defend the five following positions: (1) philosophy is still possible, it is even necessary, and there is some urgency in reconstructing it; (2) its systematic reconstruction will enable it to avoid the various *disasters* (the term is to be taken as a concept) that have befallen it and that are due to its reduction (Badiou uses the Lacanian term *suture*, 'stitching') to a non-philosophical field (if philosophy is 'stitched' to science, positivism ensues; if to politics, Marxism; if to art, Heideggerian hermeneutical vaticinations); (3) philosophy is necessary because it is eternal (it is not affected, in its necessity, by historical conjunctures – it is not a Western prejudice); (4) philosophy is concerned not with giving a positive content to Truth, in the guise of an instance of a theory of Truth, for Truth is an empty category. Philosophy is concerned with grasping and subsuming under the empty category the truths produced in the various fields where they can be expected to emerge:

such truths (of which more later) operate as *conditions* for philosophy; (5) from which it appears that, against the Sophists whose only preoccupation is language, interpretation and their endless games, philosophy does indeed deal with truth – only in the plural. Badiou's is a philosophy of the Many, not the One.

Such positions make Badiou the heir to a rich tradition of metaphysics: his stance, he claims with a hint of provocation, is a 'Platonism of the manifold'. But it is a lonely place, as he opposes everything continental philosophy of the post-structuralist kind has been about. He has a few masters (Althusser and, above all, Lacan), but they are duly superseded. There is only one Other, with whom discussion might have been possible, were it not for the fact of his death: Deleuze. Badiou's 1997 book *Deleuze* is an attempt to hold such a discussion: not an easy task, as the interlocutor remains mute, and the book soon becomes yet another celebration of Badiou's system. Yet, in spite of obvious differences, of style and stance, the two philosophies have common points, not least in the centrality of the concept of the event.

3. Truths

Badiou's system is based on an ontology, to which most of *L'Être et l'événement* is devoted, and which explains its Heideggerian title. But there are vast differences with the great philosophical ancestor. The first is that ontology, the account of being-qua-being, is the domain not of philosophy, but of mathematics. The task of the *magnum opus*, a book of philosophy, is to chart the modern developments of the science of mathematics, and to grasp their philosophical implications. Like his predecessor Jean-Toussaint Desanti (or, if we go further back, Lautman and Cavailles), Badiou is a mathematical philosopher. I am not competent to assess the accuracy of his mathematical thinking, and shall leave it to the Sokalites to try and sink their teeth into him – although I have a strong suspicion that they would break in the attempt. (Incidentally, the essay 'Sujet et infini' in *Conditions* is a model of what a firm but intelligent reading should be: Lacan's errors in mathematical theory are duly pointed out and criticized, yet the essay is devoted to an understanding of Lacan's text – a reading, not a facile demolition.) The second difference with Heidegger has already been noted. Badiou's is an ontology of the manifold, which means that the concept of multiplicity is central to his philosophy, as it is for Deleuze, and for a similar reason: there is no place for the One, therefore no transcendence. Badiou's and Deleuze's are the great contemporary philosophies of immanence.

Being based on ontology, the system is concerned not with language but with truth. Let us try to clarify the concept. As we have seen, there is no theory of Truth in Badiou (as adequacy, or disclosure): the concept of Truth philosophers operate with is empty; its function is to allow the gathering and grasping of local truths. And such truths, being processes engaged with the emergence of an event, have nothing to do with knowledge or meaning. For Badiou, a truth is not what knowledge yields ('I know that p ' entails 'it is true that p '); rather, it is what exceeds, in a given situation, the knowledge that accounts for it (what Badiou calls the encyclopaedia of the situation). A truth is what, in a situation, knowledge cannot see, what its language cannot utter: a truth is a puncturing of such knowledge. As a result, it can have no truck with meaning either: a truth, Badiou claims, is that which doesn't make sense in a situation, 'a hole in meaning'; it cannot be the object of a hermeneutic procedure.

Can we give a positive characterization of truth? Only after a detour through a kind of negative theology. A truth, as 'outside meaning', has four 'modalities', which it is the task of philosophy to grasp: it is undecidable, being linked to the aleatory advent of an event; it is indiscernible – the process of truth is not governed by any internal or external necessity; it is generic – a truth has no characteristic expressible within knowledge; and it is unnameable – forcing a truth by naming it within the language of the encyclopaedia destroys it, the only name of a truth must be outside the language of the situation. The task of philosophy is to follow this negative path, to extract, or rather *subtract* the truth from knowledge and meaning. A truth, therefore, is always truth *in* a situation, but it is not *of* the situation: it is a puncturing of the knowledge that accounts for the situation, a process triggered by an emergence, within the given, of the radically new – an event. Badiou's is a philosophy of revolution, where the event as emergence, not so much crisis but devastating flash of otherness, plays the central role. There is truth only where and when an event has occurred. And the event is aleatory, unpredictable, a 'point of exception': all that can be said about it is, in Badiou's terms, 'it so happens that something happens.'

The system being systematic, we have a chain of concepts. The *situation* is what we find ourselves in – it is, of course, a manifold of manifolds (the situation in which the French Revolution occurs is made up of an infinity of manifolds: classes, economic relations, a king, a bunch of philosophers, etc., not forgetting a

Bastille). This situation is punctured by an event (for instance, the fall of the Bastille): the *event* is situated in the situation, it has a *site* in it; but it does not belong to it, it is *supplementary* to it. The event comes and goes in a flash (it has no duration, only a retro-active temporality: the temporality of after-the-event), but it leaves traces, traces that allow an *encounter* (*rencontre*) for elements of the situation. Such encounters, as on the road to Damascus, initiate a process of *truth*. They are not mere illuminations, but are confirmed by *inquests* (a term obviously borrowed from Mao Tse-Tung): truth comes in the course of the inquest. Once reached, it provokes a process of *faithfulness* (*fidélité*) on the part of he who has encountered truth, the militant: for him or her, the situation has radically changed. The militant of truth, in her faithfulness, becomes a *subject* – not a psychological subject, nor an individual subject, but the bearer of the process of truth. Thus, the subject of the truthful amorous encounter is not the individual lover but the Two of them. The subject is that which makes the human animal escape her animality, that which gives her her intimation of immortality.

But this is still a philosophical account of the structure of truth: we must go further, into the sites where events flash like bolts of lightning, and truths emerge.

4. Events

Badiou states, with his usual assertiveness, that there are four fields in which events occur, and in which therefore truths are produced: science (which for him appears to be mainly mathematics – there is hardly any mention of other sciences in his work), art, politics and love. Or again, there are revolutions in politics, but also in science, and there are breakthroughs in art, as there is such a thing as love at first sight (Badiou is the first – and only – philosopher of the *coup de foudre*, a good name for the event). The philosopher's heroes are those who are associated with such events, whose names are in fact the names of events: mathematicians from Cantor to Cohen, poets from Mallarmé to Mandelstam (taking in Pessoa, and not merely the inevitable Celan), Mao (although Badiou's Maoism has become more subdued, he still lists the Long March, and especially the Great Cultural Revolution, as political events), and theorists of love, of whom there are only two, the Plato of the *Symposium* and Lacan – indeed, Lacanian psychoanalysis is to love what set theory is to mathematics.

Badiou is never entirely clear why there should be events in those four fields, and only those. One of the

reasons may be found in his professed Platonism: those are the four fields theorized by Plato (the 'matheme' of mathematics is broached in the theory of Ideas; politics is the object of the *Republic* and the *laws*; and poetry is excluded from the ideal city in a gesture that Badiou interprets as Freudian denial).

Because this is still rather abstract, let us envisage the 'eventuality' of an artistic subfield, music. Badiou evokes two musical events, the invention of the classical style by Haydn, and the revolution of the Viennese school. Because the revolutionary character of Schönberg's music is hardly in doubt, we may concentrate on Haydn. 'Haydn', of course, is the name of an event, rather than the heroic individual subject of the revolution. He occurs, so to speak, in a conjuncture where Baroque music has exhausted its impetus and musical potential, and fallen into mere virtuosity. Haydn occurs in this situation, whose 'void' (a central concept in Badiou's ontology) he pins down and points out – the unacknowledged emptiness of Baroque style, its incapacity to 'conceive musical architectonics' (a questionable assertion). The Haydn event consists in introducing that – the architectonics – which was unthinkable and unknown within Baroque music. This, of course, begs a host of questions (some of the more obvious objections will be dealt with in the next section). But it does demonstrate the capacity of Badiou's concepts to subsume widely divergent fields, to reveal their common structure (of 'eventual' truth).

One of the most convincing developments occurs in the short book on ethics, a virulent critique of the hypocrisy of the ideology of human rights that pervades the media and a notable part of official philosophy. In it, Badiou develops a theory of Good and Evil which he deduces from his system of concepts. Evil is always subsidiary to positive Good; it is the name of one of the disasters that can befall Good, which consists in the seeking after a truth in a process of post-eventual faithfulness. In other words, Good is what the militant of the event attempts to be faithful to; Evil what happens when she fails. According to Badiou, there are three types of Evil, corresponding to the three possible disasters (there is in Badiou a



mixture of the mathematician and the Vietnamese communist: points are carefully distinguished and numbered, which explains the extreme clarity of his thought, and the impression of reductiveness it often gives). If the celebrated 'event' is not a hole in the situation but an already existing (and discernible, and nameable) aspect of it, we have not a process of truth but a *simulacrum* of truth. This is the first type of Evil: the example Badiou gives is the spurious Nazi 'revolution' – for not any novelty is an event. The second type he calls *betrayal*: the process of truth triggered by the event that interpellates a subject as its militant is infinite. Not all militants are capable of such continued fidelity: some fall back, and betray. For you cannot simply forget a truth or give it up – you must decide that it never was: such is the essence of betrayal. The third type he calls *terror* (here the Soviet system of the Gulag is the main historical referent). It occurs when the supplementary 'point of exception' of truth is taken as all-embracing, when the name of the event claims to name not a hole in the

situation but the whole of it, when in the name of truth, by nature singular and incoherent, a 'subject' (the Marxist-Leninist party) forcibly coheres the situation from this excentric point: then terror, as we know, does reign.

5. For example

So far, I have attempted to expound Badiou's system. Now is the time to put it to work. He does this himself on many occasions – his close commentary of Mallarmé in *Conditions* is a model. But since my own interest lies in English literature, I shall try to produce an interpretation of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* in terms of Badiou's concepts.

Take a situation, let us call it Geneva at the end of the eighteenth century. It is composed of various manifolds, physical (the city itself, its inhabitants, the woods and mountains that surround it) and moral (social and family relationships; the culture, beliefs and knowledge of the time, as embodied, for instance, in the universities). In that situation, and yet out of it, an event occurs. Someone, anybody, a young man called Victor Frankenstein, has an idea: it comes in a flash, and it is impossible, in that it contradicts the knowledge available to him. It is also forbidden because blasphemous: he suddenly knows, with the extreme certainty that usually only madness gives, how to create life. The event can only be named in an impossible sentence, one that does not belong to the encyclopaedia of the situation, and 'punctures' its language: I, a man, can create him, a living creature.

Note that the impossible sentence is obtained through a slight torsion of a banal sentence, 'I have given you life' (any father can say that), a torsion that deliberately applies the wrong predicate ('create') to the subject ('I, a man'): within the language of the situation, the subject-language (*la langue sujet*) is that which utters the unsayable. Note also that there was no preparation possible for the event in the language of the encyclopaedia: Frankenstein 'prepares' himself (an impossible task) by withdrawing from official science and perusing hopelessly out-of-date treatises on alchemy, whence no real knowledge can be obtained.

Once the event has occurred, a process of truth and faithfulness is engaged. Faithfulness first: Frankenstein abandons his studies, separates himself from his nearest and dearest, shuts himself in solitary chambers, where he dabbles with bits of corpses. But also truth: such sacrifices must be undergone in the interest of his (utterly disinterested) fixed idea, the realization of the truth of the event, its embodiment in a real living creature, the monster – who is not, at his birth, in the least monstrous (he is, we remember, the epitome of goodness and benevolence), but truth incarnate.

However, something goes wrong – in a flash also: a kind of counter-event. In a movement totally lacking in psychological verisimilitude, Victor, when first contemplating the result of his toil, a creature that is alive and kicking, is seized with an overwhelming feeling of repulsion – and immediately calls his creature a 'monster'.



This is a remarkable literary description of the Evil of betrayal. Victor is not capable of the continuity that the process of truth implies. At first, he seeks simply to forget about his truth, by abandoning the creature to his own devices. But this will not do: betrayal implies something more, the denial that the event ever occurred. This Victor attempts to do by giving chase to the monster in order to annihilate him. And this betrayal has the direst consequences: it involves a similar betrayal in the creature himself, who becomes a monster, the embodiment no longer of an event, but of Evil. First, he tries to adhere to the pre-eventual situation by developing petty-bourgeois yearnings: he dreams of a mawkish felicity for himself, imagining that he might go to church on a Sunday between his monstress of a wife and some cute little monsters. Victor rightly refuses to make such puny yearnings come true: the monster, being the trace of an event, is always supernumerary, his destiny cannot be spelt out in the language of the situation; this is why, although he does try, Victor cannot complete the making of a bride for his monster. Second, his desire having failed to materialize, the monster becomes a serial killer – thus going from the betrayal that clings to the old situation to the terror that accepts the exceptional nature of the event, and seeks to force this exception on to every subpart of the situation.

Such disasters must be taken *en abyme*. For the terror waged on mankind by the monster is a reflection of the historical Terror in France, which Mary Shelley perceived as a betrayal of the ideals of the French Revolution, in which left-wing British intellectuals of the time believed. And Victor's betrayal is the literary inscription of Mary Shelley's own betrayal: she, like Victor, was not faithful enough to continue the process of political truth initiated with the fall of the Bastille, and became a petty-bourgeois conservative, the mother of an earl.

I have no doubt that in this case at least the system works. It allows us to weave together, in a single interpretation, the various threads of the tale: the fact that it is a tale of terror, with a distinct scientific and religious intertext, its link to a precise political conjuncture, but also the monster's passage from universal benevolence to utmost malice, as well as Victor's otherwise unaccountable revulsion, after years of work, at the very moment of his triumph.

The system is fascinating. It captures the reader. But it is also infuriating. Although the brevity of my exposition is largely responsible for it, the reader must have felt countless objections rising in his mind. So let us leave the fortress, contemplate it from a distance,

and try to take it by storm. The task is formidable, the battlements are equipped with heavy cannon, but the Light Brigade is gallant, and its morale is high – let us charge.

6. Mao, not Marx

The first charge is the neglect of language. Like Deleuze, Badiou is one of the rare contemporary philosophers who show little interest in language. Lacan is his master, but he makes no use of the theory of the signifier; Heidegger is explicitly rebuked for his stitching of philosophy on to the poem – hence Badiou has no time for his considerations on *die Sprache*. And when he does give a close commentary of a Mallarmé poem (as I said, a model reading), he begins, *horrible dictu* for the average literary critic, by giving a prose paraphrase of the text. Mind you, all this is entirely explicit: Badiou is out to 'free philosophy from the tyranny of language'. By charging him with neglect of language, I am merely confessing that I am a Sophist, a term which I willingly accept: to ontology, I prefer logology, to use the term coined by Barbara Cassin in another monument of recent French philosophy, *L'Effet sophistique* (1995) – another book crying out for translation into English.

The first charge has failed, and the Light Brigade must retreat. Undaunted, however, it soon charges again. One of the obvious puzzlements of the system is the arbitrary, if not haphazard, nature of the list of fields in which events thunder and processes of truth occur. Why those four, and why only those four? I shall suggest, first, that there is a concealed fifth field beneath them (an accusation which Badiou will have no difficulty in repelling) and, second, that there is one truly missing.

On the face of it, a fifth field must be added: religion. There is not only an ontology, there appears to be a theology in Badiou. For what is more 'eventual' in his sense than the Resurrection? Does it not puncture the old situation, and change it for good? Is it not undatable in the terms of its encyclopaedia? Does it not engineer encounters, provoke conversion? Is not faithfulness close to faith, as the French 'fidélité' is close to 'les fidèles'? (Badiou claims the word is borrowed from the vocabulary of love, but this smacks of Freudian denial.) Cannot every single term of his system of concepts be translated into religious terms, so that we shall have no difficulty in finding the equivalents in Badiouese for terms like 'conversion', 'grace', 'the elect', and so on? Does not he himself recognize this by hailing St Paul as the archetypal figure of the subject of a process of truth?

But therein lies the rub. Badiou's system looks like a theology, but this is a fact of which he must be entirely aware. And his is a theology without (a) God: Badiou's is an atheist's philosophy. And God is not a significant absence, as in theologies of the death of God. There is no transcendence in Badiou: the central tenet of his system is that the process of truth is *not* a process of meaning. Truth is a process, not an illumination. Forcing meaning on to a process of truth leads to the Evil of terror (the history of most religious movements is rich in examples of this). And there is at least one term which has no equivalent in Badiou's language: redemption. So the second charge may be deemed to have failed, even if the criticism may crop up again later. But let us charge again, with renewed vigour: one field is missing in his list, barely concealed under politics – history.

Badiou may still be a Maoist, but he is hardly a Marxist (the name rarely appears in his work – it is certainly not the name of an event or a process of truth). But the absent name will insist: we have long been familiar with another theory of the revolution (if, as I have suggested in my illustration, 'revolution' is a name for the event); its author is, precisely, Marx. But for a Marxist a revolution is not a flash of lightning: it is an essentially rational occurrence, which can be analysed and explained. True, it cannot be predicted with any certainty, but it can be striven towards. The militant Marxist is not merely a follower of a past event, or one who waits for the 'divine surprise' of the event-to-come, as others wait for Godot. He is not in quest of the traces of an event; he practises, to speak like Lenin, the concrete analysis of a concrete situation. In other words, the political revolution, although it introduces radical novelty in the situation, is a *rational* novelty: it is not ex-centric to the knowledge available in the situation; its necessity can be formulated in its language. In other words, a Marxist has a political programme. Even if accurate prediction is impossible, she projects herself on to a middle- or long-term future: there is a kind of foreseeable necessity in the revolution.

What, in Badiou's system, is incompatible with Marxism, is the temporality of the event. Historicism is one of Badiou's bugbears. For good reason: there is no history in the system, but a rather complex organization of time. The event itself, being instantaneous, is outside time. The process of truth, the quest of the inquest, the continuity of faithfulness, on the other hand, require infinite time. And philosophy is outside time too, in so far as it is eternal. This has nothing to do with the progressive exhaustion of the potential in social relations, with the rising of tension as the

productive forces overtake, and eventually overwhelm the relations of production, that accounts for the coming of revolution in classical Marxism. Whether there is gain or loss in this, I leave the reader to judge.

A brief detour through linguistics may make this clearer. For the linguist William Croft (see his *Syntactic Categories and Grammatical Relations*, 1991), an event-predicate (represented by a verb) has three semantic components: cause, change, result. Thus, 'kill' may be glossed as 'cause to become dead'. Badiou's event concentrates on the moment of change: it is an event without a cause, a pure emergence, which forfeits explanation and prediction. We understand why the truth that is a result of the event cannot yield a meaning: it can subjectively make sense by convoking a subject for the militancy of the event; it cannot give him a meaning, neither the meaning of life nor the meaning of history. Badiou's atheism undercuts Marxism as well as religion.

This, naturally, raises problems. The militant can look backward (in faithfulness), but not forward. For him, the coming event is like what happens to Russell's notorious rationalist turkey, which believed that a law of nature made the farmer's wife feed it every day, and was brutally converted to Humian scepticism on Christmas Eve. There is a serious problem behind this: since the event is, where I am situated, essentially unintelligible, how can I recognize an event, if not by an illumination, on the road to Damascus? Answering that an inquest is required for such recognition will not do: for the inquest will be held in the only terms I know, those of the encyclopaedia of the situation. This does not mean that Badiou's system renders political action impossible; it does mean that it makes rational politics impossible. I sympathize with most of Badiou's political choices: his defence of 'les sans-papiers'; his insistence on universalism against communitarianism and identity (in *Saint-Paul*); his critique of the ideology of consensus and 'human rights' (commonly used to justify imperialist expeditions – this in *L'Ethique*); but I can find hardly anything within the system to protect me from Heidegger's mistake, when he took the National Socialist 'revolution' for an event, and thought that a new process of truth had started. The risk is that the eventuality of the event will eventually be left to subjective decision. For Badiou the Great Cultural Revolution in China was an event. I cannot agree that it is one; the system is too abstract to provide a clear procedure of decision. For 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, as is obvious in Badiou's treatment of music, where events are limited to conventional periodization (Baroque, classical, etc.) and great names (that 'Haydn' should be the name of an event in the field of art is hardly news). I think I may have to remain a Marxist Sophist after all.

7. The other

The system is sometimes infuriating, always captivating: on the whole an imposing, if lonely, achievement. The best way to break its isolation (Badiou belongs to no group or school, and is deliberately out of tune with the spirit of the times) is to compare Badiou's philosophical position with that of the philosopher he himself has, quite rightly designated as his other, Deleuze.

In his introduction to *Conditions*, François Wahl opposes their philosophical styles as respectively foundational and descriptive. Foundational Badiou certainly is. We might even take his name for the name of an event, were it not that philosophy is not a field of truth, and there is therefore no philosophical event (this modesty is compensated by the fact that philosophy, grasping local truths under the category of Truth, subsumes the manifold of truths under the One of the structure: the One system, under which phil-

osophy must be deemed to be achieved – there is more Hegelian hubris in Badiou than he himself would like to acknowledge). But the difference in styles is certainly striking. Where Deleuze is copious, proliferating and problematic, Badiou is assertive and thetic (a device he learned from Althusser, and which contributes to the explicitness and clarity of his text). Where Deleuze is rhizomatic, Badiou is hierarchic – witness the famous tripartitions, or the Vietnamese communist syndrome. Where the philosopher's task, in Deleuze, is to make concepts, in Badiou it is to achieve philosophy: one is an artisan; the other, if not a prophet, at least an architect.

There is only one Mont Blanc. The ascent is difficult, sometimes deadly, but it is worth it, as the view is magnificent, and the achievement momentous. True, it is lonely up there, and one may be seized with nostalgia at the thought of the merry tinkle in the artisan's shop down in the valley, as he potters around with his concepts. Yet, in the end, the exhilaration of great heights will prevail: the ascent is a necessity, for only up there shall we have a complete view of the philosophical scene, and escape the facilities of the contemporary 'prêt-à-penser'. Even if we don't agree with him, we have to agree that Badiou towers over the French philosophical landscape, that he is undoubtedly a major philosopher. I can only repeat myself: it is high time his works were available in English.

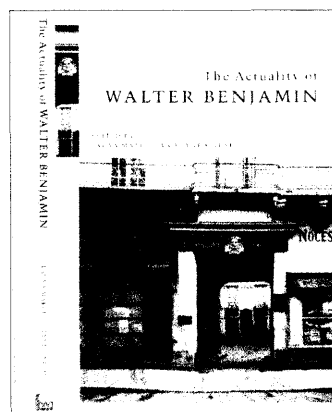
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