

# **Badiou's Own Mallarmé<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract:** Stephane Mallarmé's poetry is all-pervasive in the philosophical project of Alain Badiou. In his thinking, Mallarmé is a singular poet, among the poets discussed in Badiou's work. He who exists among others, but is always placed ahead. Or, as Badiou himself says, he is "like a Master of truth, "emblematic of the relation between philosophy and poetry." This essay is an examination of Badiou's Mallarmé, in all its specificities.

**Keywords:** Badiou, Mallarme, poetry, philosophy, method

I myself have expressed the desire for a philosophy that would finally be the contemporary of Mallarmés poetic operations<sup>2</sup>. – Badiou

My philosophy assumes the poem as one of its conditions<sup>3</sup> – Badiou

Mallarmé is omnipresent in the oeuvre of Alain Badiou, to the point of being a preoccupation – of interest and confusion – a distinctive trait of his oeuvre, above all, like a singular cloud that takes form between philosophy and poetry, particularly through Mallarmé and reflection. We would almost be tempted to speak of *rumination*, which is obsessively and obstinately given: all the more so since thought, which does not exist for the purpose of monographic study, or the taking up of this or that aspect of Mallarmé's poetic production, can be found in *Theory of the Subject* and *Being and Event*, combined, mixed, and implied in forms that, moreover, remain to be elucidated, to the philosophical argument on its own terrain, where we encounter Mallarmé as a protagonist in his own right, a "thinker" to be reckoned with. Consequently, this reflection does not boil down to a reflection on, or by Mallarmé, treated as one object of thought among others, but rather presents itself as reflection, whereby Mallarmé is at once that which is reflected and that which reflects in the operation, whereby something like truth is expressed. It is through such reflection that philosophy and poetry dialogue as equals, one of the conditions of this dialogue, given that poetry has been subsumed by the jurisdiction of aesthetics, and has been installed in the order of what Badiou terms the "inaesthetic," in action, "inaestheticization," which is

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1 Translator's note: When possible, the English translations of Badiou, as cited by Macherey throughout the text, have been employed. Otherwise, they are my own.

2 Badiou 2005, p.36

3 Ibid., 54

the necessary condition for the restoration of its speculative dimension. It is worth considering who is the Mallarmé who is reflecting and who is reflected in the philosophy of Alain Badiou. How does this reflection operate, and why Mallarmé, who exists among others, but is always placed ahead, like a Master of truth, “emblematic of the relation between philosophy and poetry,” (Badiou’s own formulation in the “Method of Mallarmé” from *Conditions*) which constitutes a privileged vector of this reflection.

Firstly, which Mallarmé? Let us permit ourselves to say that there is one Mallarmé, essential and attuned to his vocation, as demonstrated by his numerous productions, poetic and theoretical: that is to say, *purified*, becoming a figure of his own oeuvre, in the sense of the Mallarmé of Mallarmé. No doubt separated from his epoch, from the inexorable flouncing and fanning, and other dated affectations, he stands detached from them, in the sense of a retreat, through which the distance is set by way of them. The book, as exemplar of these affectations, is rendered absent to itself, becoming a quasi-metaphysical operator of disappearance, which also orchestrates a power of revelation. This Mallarmé, without a doubt, is the true Mallarmé, not “true” in the sense of the historicist, of an exactitude that purports to exhaust every detail of the thing, by saying everything there is to say about Mallarmé, as the literary critic or biographer might do. In a sense, Mallarmé is changed by eternity, that is to say, he has become, in the Mallarméan sense of the term, a tomb of himself, and under this condition, he delivers his pure thought over to the examination of philosophy, which, according to an expression that brings us back to Badiou, places itself at his level, his height. For Mallarmé, essentialized, stands at a vertiginous height, like a constellation of thought, whose order, or rather necessary disorder, evades direct apprehension and demand, is emptied of any hermeneutic requirement and of the task of deciphering, beyond the illusions of meaning, he surges toward the event of truth, to the event that is the eruption of truth.

Reduced to pure form, and stripped of all anecdotal content, Mallarmé is presented as the bearer of a “method” and even a “logic,” a “subtractive” method that takes the poem to be “a negative machinery that states the being or the idea at the precise point where the object has vanished”: as Badiou says, this method “submits the object to the test of its lack” (“Que pense le poème?” in *L’art est-il une connaissance ?*, 219). This strategy, of elision and lack, in a sense evokes the Hegelian concept of the negativity, and is detailed at length in *Theory of the Subject* and in the text on “the Method of Mallarmé,” whereby method is presented while “the Method of Rimbaud” (from *Conditions*) constitutes a return, that is itself purged of its previous analyses. This strategy is performative:

“What the poem says, it does.”<sup>4</sup>This is to say, it is insufficient to speak to about the lack of being, whereby the world returns to its essential place, a “nothing takes place but the place.” This lack is carried out by saying “the lack of lack,” wholly other than a negativity of saving and redeeming, which is, in the final instance, Hegelian negativity. Rather, it is a negativity of the incomplete, whose poem is the *mise en oeuvre*, paradoxically complete, ordered, and rigorously thought through. Conceived in this way, the poem does not reproduce the world in its absence, and this is why it has renounced it in all possible ways, the mirages of imitation. Rather, he produces, in the space of language that is his site, the absence of the world; in a literal sense, he speaks in the future anterior of how being is devoid of world, which is something else entirely than evoking or suggesting its presence. In other words, we might say that the poem dictates to the poet his intervention, charged with enunciating the un-representability of the world, in opposition to the pretension to represent it by carrying out an illusionary wedding of the beautiful and true, as celebrated by traditional aesthetics.

Understood this way, a Mallarméan poetics appears to be inseparable from its “truth procedure,” which proceeds from the dissolution of particular significations, despite their claim to an immediate positivity: submitting to schemes of solitude and separation, the significations explode, and the machine of the poem has no other function than to produce and set this explosion. What the poem says, it does. It does not speak of the nothingness of the world, from beneath a gloss that enunciates the secret of its presence, but rather, it annuls the world, concretely, if we may say so, by elevating poetic speech to the maximum of its power, by making of it a *dispositif* intervention, an action. This is why its method and its logic do not make Mallarmé a philosopher, that is to say, at bottom, a commentator of truths. Nevertheless, on occasion one finds in some of Mallarmé's prose, texts that are philosophical texts, and even great philosophical texts, is that his poetic action, embodied in the production of poems, gives the philosopher objects for commentary, ideas in their pure states, materialized in verbal formations that are perfectly self-enclosed, which are not, however, segments of sense to be interpreted, but rather, the traces left by the poetic activity, the de-segmentation of the truth, which liberates it from the prison of meaning.

These are the singular characteristics of poetic activity that are commonly received as manifestation of hermeticism: and once again, the interpretation fails to reach the truth of the thing. Mallarmé is not hermetic, in the sense of a well-hidden secret that must be pierced; he is only difficult because he is, as an essential poet, a producer of enigmas that provoke thought. The effort is not to bring out into the open a pre-

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4 Badiou 2009, p.81

existing truth, given the difficulty of its decipherment, but to insinuate it in the act by which truth occurs – literally produces – by way of a form that is precisely that of the enigma, and at the limit of non-sense; the secret being ultimately that there is no secret, such that what the poem has to say is spread out, scattered, dispersed, carefully spaced black on white, in the constellation that is for eternity, once thrown, the throw of dice, its text. Michel Leiris, in a text on “Mallarmé as professor of morality,” written in 1943, had already explained that Mallarmé had invented, “a language that aims less at describing or recounting, than at activating certain movements of spirit.” These movements of spirit provoke the mechanisms (machine) of the poem, and here we must consider the word “provocation” in its fullness, the exercise of a thought in action, that is to say, of a thought that freely confronts the exigencies and constraints that impel it, without that which obliges it to mold itself according to a pre-established program: and this is why the machine of the poem is self-moving, given the elocutionary absence of the poet, and the foreclosure of the subject of the poem, and there lies its essential nature, like a machine that propels thought, producing flashes of truth.

Thus rendered essential, how might we read this Mallarmé, who exists as a proposition or an occasion of truth? Such that his method calls forth, demands. Though the instructions of the poem are not read with the poem or with the accompanying notes, where the poet delivers the shards of his poetic art, which cannot be exploited unless we have already entered into the dynamic of the movements of spirit, without which the poem is null and void, as Badiou writes: “It is the poems that shed light on the prose, and the effectiveness of the thought–poem of the event and of the undecidable retroactively authorizes the multi-faceted formulation of a programme. It is from thought to the thinking of thought that we go, and not the other way round.”<sup>5</sup>

The way that Badiou reads Mallarmé, how he gears into thinking poetry, is astonishing. He takes up poetic works, like *le Faune*, *la Prose pour des Esseintes*, the sonnet in *yx*, or *A la nue accablante tu*, to the letter, not for the purpose of glossing word by word, in order to extract their hidden meaning, but rather literally, to work on the body of a text, thus making it work in such a way as to produce the event, the event of truth, of which they are, rather than carriers or vectors: that which incites, triggers. This passage through prose functions like an attempt at translation that produces a narrative transposition of the poem and demonstrates, for example, that the *Throw of Dice* is a story of shipwreck, while *A la nue accablante tu* is a story of disappearance. This is the theme, or as one might say, the subject, of the poem. This indispensable preliminary operation returns our reading to the level of intelligible syntax; the other constitutes that inaccessible armature of the poem, a

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5 Badiou 2008, p.298

necessary meter that measures its force of truth, as if it were a question of a dream text, revealing itself.

The poem is obviously irreducible to its subject, as the previous cases demonstrate. Rather, it consists in the *mise en page*, which is discovered as soon as the inverse movement is traversed, thus confronting the return of the text itself, of the poem to its “translation,” without forcing a reciprocal re-translation of the first translation, from the poem to the prose where the central theme is revealed. What is important, is how the operation of the poem and its roll of dice bring to the fore a novelty in relation to the subject, or latent content, as with the passage through prose that affords the possibility of highlighting a certain newness, which the prose, in its narrative flatness, is unable to enunciate. In the case of *A la nue accablante tu*, where the subject is, as we have noted, a shipwreck, what Badiou proposes is not the telling or evoking of certain aspects or episodes of the shipwreck, but rather how the purely verbal modes reveal that the shipwreck has already taken place, and thus is no more, having left behind the negative event that it was and that no longer exists, save the evasive wake of its annihilating power, which is something other than nothingness simply opposed to being. To put it more simply, we can say that the subject of the poem is shipwreck, which enunciates as its subject: the shipwreck of shipwreck. Similarly, in the sonnet *xy*, what is evoked is not the convoluted and anecdotal evocation of an absence, the brute facticity of an empty room, but rather, it is an effort to say what is absent in absence, the absence of the absence, the nothingness of the nothingness, that is to say, its force of becoming-nothingness, whereby a truth, a fragment of truth comes to be.

This movement between poetry and prose and prose and poetry produces a looping effect. In a key passage from *Theory of the Subject*, Badiou virtualizes this operation by adding an additional four stanzas to *A la nue accablante tu*, a supplementary tercet carefully composed in dialectical fashion, following the operation of the shipwreck of shipwreck, to the point where, as if by the magic virtue of a negation of the negation that is transformed into affirmation, the shipwrecked object, the ship, reappears on the surface of the waves. Now, this fifth stanza is not written by Badiou in order to complete the poem to its incompleteness, but rather to make us understand, ironically, that the fifth stanza does not figure in the constellation of the poem, thus depriving it of any poetic reality. It literally does not exist: the poem gleams through absence, and is perfectly self-enclosed, it is completed by its enigmatic closure that ‘subtracts’ it; in Mallarmé, the subtraction is the poetic operation par excellence. This is the reason that Badiou writes: “let us proclaim that Mallarmé’s poetic machine, though opaque when looked at from the outside, nevertheless possesses only a single meaning. We must put an end to the laziness that has so many readers bypass the obstacle in order to claim that the enigma’s virtue consists in allowing a hundred

underlying answers. This absolute dialectician does not present any 'polysemy'.<sup>6</sup> By way of this incursion, the poem is arrested, is made to end, and draws from its incompleteness, from its finitude, its power of completion, identical to the constellation that follows from the throw of dice. This would be, in the eyes of Badiou, what distinguishes the pure poetry of Mallarmé from the prose of Beckett or the poetry-prose of Rimbaud, which do not produce a similar looping effect. On the contrary, they open the possibility of continuing beyond themselves. The poem, as Mallarmé produces it, is a poem that is materially self-enclosed, appearing to be sufficient, and it is by virtue of this closure that the poem functions as a poem, following the conditions of the operation, it must be switched on to illuminate, like the machine that propels thought.

Now we are beginning to understand why Badiou returns to Mallarmé as exemplary of the cloud between poetry and philosophy, as he conceives it. The introductory remarks in *Handbook of Inaesthetics* make this clear: Against aesthetic speculation, inaesthetics describes the strictly intra-philosophical effects produced by the independent existence of some works of art.<sup>7</sup> Badiou's fidelity to the excellence of Mallarméan poetics means that his philosophical inaesthetics concern only "a few works of art," a carefully selected group consisting of Mallarmé, Rimbaud, Pessoa, Beckett, Celan; but not Hugo, not Baudelaire, nor Verlaine, Reverdy, Aragon; he does not consider Vielé-Griffin, Rodenbach or Verhaeren, and we may presume that they are too "expressive" to be treated as machines that propel thought. The severity of this selection demonstrates that Badiou is intent on avoiding the trap of a generalized aesthetic, which poses in the abstract, the question concerning the relation between art and truth: to this end, it is not art as such that produces truths, and, in fact, for the most part, it does not produce any, it remains sensuous entertainment, therefore in all cases of seduction, we may say that truth is only revealed in exceptional cases, and are, by virtue of their exceptionality, testimonies to the will of rupture, that defines, in its essence, the poetic fact: unique and irreplaceable, Mallarmé. From this point of view, Badiou's enterprise becomes clear: to sketch the boundaries of an Aesthetic-Thought, limits that are narrowly forged, limits that would disqualify most aesthetic productions, which, possessed by the vertigo of image and meaning, offer themselves up for aesthetic consumption, barring them from any relation to truth. This is one manifestation of Badiou's Platonism. In a truly classical manner, this Platonism is anti-Aristotelian. That is to say, in line with his thinking about poetry, Badiou stands on the front line against his foremost adversary: *mimesis*.

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6 Ibid., p.74

7 Badiou 2005, p.5

What makes the poetic approach of Mallarmé's (and a few others) so exceptional, is the way it wrests poetry from the trap of the referent, that is to say, from the mirage of presence. As previously stated, in essence, poetry has nothing to say about the world, we could say, in other terms, that it "reflects" nothing, "a reflection" that bears the mark of realism, that may even be socialist, has reignited ancient mimesis, renewing the pretension that art can adequately represent reality, a reality that can only affect those who conform to it, who treat it like money, that is to say, that which alienates them. Conceived in this way, the inaesthetic is, as we can see, the bearer of a latent aesthetic, a negative aesthetic from the point of view of art and its controlled vertigos. Contrary to the position held by Badiou and his scrupulous reading of art works, whereby Mallarmé holds first rank, the inverse position draws demarcation lines as to exclude the whole of poetic production from the alienating jurisdiction of aesthetics and its hedonic attachments, even when these productions take on a mimetic form and reveal themselves as image and meaning. In the end, in Badiou's own prose writing, which we can suspect is inseparable from his philosophical activity, and philosophical reflection concerning Mallarméan poetics, Badiou privileges, at the exclusion of poetry, the novel, theater, and dramatic narrative, that is to say, the two genres that edify Aristotle's *Poetics*.

In brief, to close the discussion: the image, whether verbal or plastic, is not solely the evocation of a presence, but also its other side, the de-presentation of that which is presented, producing a reality effect that alienates, though not fatally. In the mimetic space it can also function as a potentially critical mode, as a means of critique. Understood this way, we may prefer Badiou's position and the program of a general inaesthetic, which does not amount to a new positive aesthetic that would restore to the whole production of art, or at least to the majority, a certain familiarity, the degree which would have to be re-evaluated each time in a determinate manner, alongside the work of thought. In the case of Mallarmé, as privileged by Badiou, this familiarity reveals a sort of evidence that we may call palpable, but this does not hold in other cases or with less apparent forms, works of literature which, at first glance, only offer themselves to common consumption, and thus cannot, given the cost of facile engagement, elevate itself, or be raised to the height of truth, to be reflected in thought.

*Translated by Emily Laurent-Monaghan*



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