

A Sketch of a Portrait of Alain Badiou's philosophy

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Let us first explain this title. This is a sketch because, at this point in my life, I did not have the time for a project of this magnitude. This is a portrait because it is an attempt to look at Alain Badiou's philosophy as one looks at the portrait of a living being, or as this portrait looks at you, from the point of view of what the painter has captured of him. Nietzsche wrote in *Beyond Good and Evil*: "It is not easy to learn what a philosopher is, because it cannot be taught: you have to 'know' it from experience—or else you should have enough pride *not* to know it. [...] – [and the conditions for philosophy, F.R.]: only very few people are familiar with them, can be familiar with them, and all popular opinions about them are false."¹ This is why the ambition of this sketch of a portrait is not to reconstruct or discuss the theses or hypotheses, but rather to make tangible what the philosophy of Alain Badiou traverses and what it carries for all of us, what some of its gestures and of its acts are. It is a portrait so that we can see another face than the grimacing, the painted ones that imagine themselves to be what we wish to see when we look in the mirror today. Instead of the hideously multiple faces of contemporary brutes and of their terror, a valiant and beautiful face of thought.

In the same book, Nietzsche also wrote: "Little by little I came to understand what every great philosophy to date has been: the personal confession of its author, a kind of unintended and unwitting memoir; and similarly, that the moral (or immoral) aims in every philosophy constituted the actual seed from which the whole plant invariably grew."² This discovery, initially destined to remove from the philosophers their claim to impersonality, to take from them this mask that is too often placed over their oeuvres by themselves as well as by their readers, will, over the course of the book and of time be turned around and become, in a way, a supreme praise, a decisive criterion of what is worthy of the name of philosophy.

Today, too many are such that they represent philosophy as an exercise far removed from life, as well as nourished by impassive and recondite questions, out of reach due to its language, in short, confined to another world. But any philosophy worthy of the name draws, on the contrary, its source from vivid, even agonizing questions. And he or she who asks and grapples with them does so because a point of obscurity weighs heavily on them, like a curtain that limits their view, or a wall with which they collide without being able to cross or destroy it. The truly philosophical work of thought in this case is a tireless endeavour that does not abandon the question; it always returns to it, deepens or circumvents it, because to elucidate it is the condition for continuing to breathe and to hold on to the world. Alain Badiou could therefore have written: "The philosopher comes in where a question is lacking. He attempts to contribute to the formulation of the question.... a philosopher is attracted by any field in which it's clear that a question is lacking."³ Philosophy brings together two thinkings, two terms, initially foreign to each other, and whose relationship, or non-relation, raises questions.

Many people, who are neither scholars nor scientists, perceive that Alain Badiou's philosophy exists in this way. Hence, I believe, the gratitude they express towards him when they meet him by chance in the street, sometimes without ever having read him, and only having heard (of him).

To sketch this portrait, I will allow myself to work from memory and without concern for exhaustiveness. This is due to a lack of time, but above all because no portrait can ever capture the whole picture. It is always a question of restoring what struck you as worthy of being kept in view and looked at. Others (or I myself) will (later) verify the exactitude, if necessary.

Anyone who encountered Alain Badiou's work in the late 1960s came across two novels, "Almagestes" and "Portulans", accompanied by an essay, "The Concept of Model" (where philosophy and mathematics intersect for the first time), and a few articles published in the journal "Les Cahiers pour l'analyse", alongside some young Lacanians. One could also encounter the short films produced by Dina Dreyfus in which a young man with a cigarette spoke with some of the great French academics of the time. However, it was his novelistic work, his works of fiction, that occupied the largest public space at the time.

It is remarkable that this initial intertwining of philosophy and fiction will never cease. Many people interested in philosophical works neglect or consider as minor, works of fiction and theatre. This close interwovenness between philosophy and fiction is nevertheless essential because fiction comes into play whenever something is too opaque or obscure, too deadlocked, for philosophy to shed light on it by its own means.

"Almagestes" (1964) and "Portulans" (1967) therefore create complex literary forms in which we can first see an assessment of the Algerian War period, the stifling and deadlocked nature of French society that emerged from it, and the profound unease and malaise of a youth seeking to escape it. Then the risk, in the stagnant years of Gaullism, of being consumed by hopeless nihilism: "I preserved myself, I took care of myself. I undoubtedly gained time. But what can be done? After all, Cortase is declining at the same time as me. I did not invent the sand on which I am stranded." "I, if one can say I, result from this book." In this way in "Portulans" the dark years are described that immediately preceded the blossoming, of the events of "May 68", which no one foresaw.

More surprisingly, from the early 1970s onwards, while intense involvement in revolutionary politics delayed but also matured the beginning of the strictly philosophical oeuvre. The feverish writing of "L'écharpe rouge [The Red Scarf]" anticipated the ordeal that would mark the end, that was still to come, of the communist revolutions. Underneath the conscious political activity, thereby plodded, through the bias of theatre, the anxified prescience of the flaws and shortcomings of these first revolutions. Three artists brought together by a common vision—Antoine Vitez, the director; Yannis Kokkos, the set designer; and Georges Aperghis, the musician—perceived and magnificently conveyed

how the play draws an extraordinary line between a luminous tribute and a melancholic tomb.

In the mid-1990s, the LePenism began to wreak serious havoc by allowing deformed political figures to appear on the parliamentary political scene. In the series of comedies about “Ahmed le Subtil [The Subtle Ahmed]”, the characters of Moustache and La Pompestan brought these grotesque colours to the theatre. And while the far right spreads the hatred that is at the root of numerous murders of young people in the suburbs, the invention of the diagonal character of The Subtle Ahmed does justice to working-class and popular intelligence. Theatre here comes to the rescue, as philosophy does not believe it can on its own, at the height of the necessary riposte.

Similarly, in 1997, a new novelistic work, “Calme Bloc ici-bas” [Calm Block Here Below], laboured to maintain, through the power of fiction alone, a world where revolutionaries and the poor, workers and mathematicians will forever be linked. This book has as its title the beginning of Mallarmé’s verse under which the 1991 philosophical essay “Of an Obscure Disaster” was published, which sought to contemplate the collapse of the Soviet Union. “Calme Bloc” then emerged to balance out the effacement of the communist project from a contemporary world and to breathe new life into he or she who inhabits it. Just as “Les Misérables” had been for Hugo the immense receptacle of all his fidelities.

Much later, “The Incident at Antioch” will attempt to use the resources of theatre to say what no one yet wants to hear concerning the impasses of the “classic” figures of the revolution, centred on the seizure and occupation of state power. And it will attempt to sketch, in the wake of the disaster, characters who represent another path.

In the tragic circumstances surrounding the death of his son Olivier, it is a “Tomb” that, from the depths of the most violent pain, will succeed in offering the young deceased to the respect and love of all.

Over the years, this philosophy has thus manifested an urgent need to engage in dialogue with its “other interiors,” namely these multiple forms of fiction. These others intervene when subjective density and pressure, the difficult urgency of the questions could lead to their pure and simple asphyxiation or reduce them to total silence. So that if a wise publisher were to undertake the project of publishing “The Red Scarf” and “The Incident at Antioch” with the novel “Calme bloc” in between the two plays, we would have something like Alain Badiou’s “Divine Comedy,” of which “Almagestes” and “Portulans” if also brought together, could constitute not a “Vita Nuova,” but a “Farewell to the Old Life.”

According to my portrait, Alain Badiou’s philosophy is truly born with the writing and publication of “Being and Event” in 1988. (Even if some today claim to have a greater fondness for the transitional book “Theory of the Subject” from 1982). What is, after all, the founding gesture of this first major book—born without knowing that it would later appear alongside

“Logics of Worlds” and “The Immanence of Truths” as part of a vast trilogy? It is about thinking the event, to think it on an ontological level. In other words, the challenge is to understand what distinguishes an event from the general regime of being. But why is it important to elucidate this point? Because something happened that opened up this question, something that happened in the realm of politics, May 1968, and in the realm of love. For, in order to understand what differentiates being from event, we will have to construct a conception of being without One, which this philosophy will seek to uncover in mathematics, while searching in the history of philosophy (Plato, Hegel, Heidegger...) and on the side of art, particularly among the poets, for something that could open the way to a thought of the generic.

This unwavering attention to the event is the burning thread that makes this philosophy a philosophy that intervenes in all the major circumstances that time will bring about over the course of six long decades: a philosophy determined to give an account of the changing colours of historical time, while shedding light on both its shadows and its highlights.

This philosophy immediately condemns the imposture of the new philosophers, renegade gravediggers of all revolutionary figures, present, future, or past.

Badiou enters into conflict with political philosophy and its convenient regime of “the political” in order to deploy, on the contrary, the necessity of disentangling and distinguishing within the multiplicity of politics. This philosophy will ever yield to the pressures of various forms of economism which, under the guise of historical materialism or orthodox Marxism, are incapable of confronting the peremptory nature of the organizational figure of the party, its inevitable reduction to that of the state, and of taking into account the political experiments of the second half of the 20th century.

It will welcome movements—the Arab Spring, the English riots, Occupy Wall Street, the local movements, the suburban uprisings, Tsipras’ Greece...—without being satisfied with their inability to extract themselves from the electoral mechanisms of parliamentarianism.

He is not fooled by the “right to intervene” that justified the NATO’s bombing of Serbia nor by the war on Afghanistan, that was a supposed a response to the massacres of September 11 in New York, nor by the American invasion of Iraq or by the European assault, under the glorious leadership of Sarkozy and Bernard Henri-Lévy, which left Libya devastated and drained with blood.

This philosophy is repulsed by the persecution of Muslims in the name of misguided secularism and has the insolent courage to stand up and say so sharply at the time of the ban on the headscarf. It does not capitulate with regard to the future of a communist hypothesis when the USSR collapses. Nor did it cry wolf when the attacks against Charlie

Hebdo and then those of November 13 in 2015 struck France hard and plunged it into mourning: “Our evil comes from further afield,” this philosophy made us understand at the time.

In each of these circumstances, whether joyful or very bitter, the philosophical intervention paves a way through what appeared to be a difficult-to-decipher disorder, a chaos in which it seemed impossible to orient oneself under the concept of justice. It creates an unparalleled calm because it takes the time, each time, to “go full circle,” to explore hypotheses to their end, and then to propose some consequences.

Since “Ethics – Essay on the Consciousness of Evil” in 1993 and “Saint Paul. The Foundation of Universalism” in 1997, this philosophy presents itself as a gateway to the universal, not the old abstract universal compromised by the “values” of the colonial West, but of a universality constructed on the basis of singularities. The seminars will return a thousand times to the critique of identitarianism, working to formulate a new way of thinking of the same and the other.

Among the singularities, love: “De l’amour [Of Love]” in 1999 precedes “In Praise of Love”, 2009, by ten years. Placing love under the sign of the Two, in order to liberate it from the romantic fusional figure as well as from the contemporary informality of the contract. It is constructed as the place where the field of differences is ultimately experienced: what it means to be a woman and what it means to be a man, however variable their compositions may be.

What this philosophy owes to science, and more particularly to mathematics, is its constant desire to share it with everyone. To do so, it must invent new ways of transmission that can be summarized as follows: to make tangible not only the operations of mathematics, but what they think according to their very own order.

An envious person, whose name does not deserve to be mentioned, recently took Alain Badiou to task publicly, mocking his fidelity to himself. This ignores the extent to which this philosophy has constantly worked through itself, scrupulously integrating objections. “Logics of Worlds” is thus not only a supplement to “Being and Event” but also a reworking of it, a reworking that involved a very long study of the mathematical field of the topoi, in relation to the field of the sets, which had framed the previous work. As for the immense summa that is “The Immanence of Truths,” which makes available to all, for the first time in the history of thought, the mathematical categories that allow us to think infinity otherwise than in its imaginary approximation, this is a still open builder’s yard that and one where it depends on others to continue with the same courage.

This philosophy, capable of occupying the highest regions of thought, is also capable of passing through these questions by offering a second version of them that is never a “popularization” but rather openness that dares to venture into uncharted territory. Thus, for example, each major work in the trilogy gives rise, immediately after

its completion, to a short manifesto – the first and second “Manifesto for Philosophy,” which, in the case of “The Immanence of Truths,” even becomes a “Praise of Philosophy.”

Nietzsche brings together in *Beyond Good and Evil* the conditions that, in his view, are likely to give rise to a true philosophical destiny. Many of these conditions deserve to be reinterpreted, criticized, and debated today, but I will nevertheless retain the following, with regard to Alain Badiou’s philosophy: “[the] affable protection and defence of what is misunderstood and maligned, be it God or devil, [the] enjoyment and practice of the great justice, [the] art of command, the expanse of [the] will, the lingering eye that rarely admires, rarely looks up, rarely loves...”⁴ A list that I will have to complete, however: I recall that Jean-Claude Milner (in a burst of admiration almost entirely devoid of the sarcasm he often reserved for Alain Badiou) described “Being and Event,” when it was published, as a “book of the factory era,” a book, he added, in which thought asserted itself as being of the order of “modern labour.” One need only consider the 15 volumes of the *Seminar* published to date—covering the years 1983 to 2010, and existing in parallel with the rest of the work—to appreciate the scale of the relentless work of investigation that constantly speaks out of its own laboratory. Yes, this philosophy is that of a tireless, scrupulous, and superb labourer, who has devoted his entire life to the courage to think.

Translated by Frank Ruda

1 Nietzsche 1998, p. 107.

2 *Ibid.*, p.8.

3 Badiou 2013, p. 122

4 Nietzsche 1988, p. 108.

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