

'No theme requires more pure *logic* than love": On Badiou's Amorous Axiomatics

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Abstract: In thinking the relation of love and affect, one experiences a strong intuition that they are locked in a passionate mutual embrace, and that they carry out their clandestine coupling in the dark alleys of the ineffable. The work of Alain Badiou, however, challenges such an "anti-philosophical" position, and posits that the truly philosophical way to approach love is through logic. In this essay I offer a timely explication of Badiou's thoughts on love, which is occasioned by the recent challenge posed by critical discourse to rethink love and is animated by the conviction that such a rethinking entails locating love in the domain of thought rather than in a domain beyond cognition and representation. At a time when love is threatened by accusations of being nothing more than a "cruel optimism," Badiou's thought is a philosophical defense of love by underscoring its kinship to thought and to truth.

Keywords: Badiou, love, affect, event

The Effect of that woman on me was as unpleasant as a displaced irrational number that has accidentally crept into an equation.
—Yevgeny Zamyatin, *We*¹

The concept of love has always been somewhat of an embarrassment for Philosophy because it has displayed a persistent obliviousness to demands for an account of itself. Whereas love is friendly to the poet, the priest, and even the psychoanalyst, it has offered only mute resistance to the cold interrogations of Philosophical inquiry. Indeed, one may observe that when some philosophers speak of love they seem afflicted with the very symptoms found so often in the love-struck: tongue-tied, confused, cryptic. Regarding this poverty in the thinking of love, Jean-Luc Nancy observes that "the impossibility of speaking about love" has already been "violently

¹ Yevgeny Zamyatin, *We*, trans. by Natasha Randall (NY: Random House, 2006), 10.

recognized."² Indeed, the universal consensus seems to be that love resides in the domain beyond the thinkable, the "experience *par excellence* of a vague ineffable intensity or confusion."³ In refusing concession to that consensus, we must ask: What is the relationship of love to thought?

As a way to initiate this discussion, let us turn to the film *The Mirror has Two Faces* (1996), an academic love story that appears to suggest that if academics pattern their love lives after their professional lives it could only lead to bland and disengaged coupling; that is, the life of the mind is diametrically opposed to a life of amorous intensity.⁴ The film is about ugly duckling Romantic Literature professor Rose Morgan (played by Barbra Streisand) who, because she is convinced that she does not deserve the kind of passionate love that she professes in her classes, hesitantly agrees to a painfully rigid Platonic marriage with Mathematics professor Gregory Larkin (played by Jeff Bridges). Allowing his profession to structure his personal life, Gregory insists on a relationship that subtracts the unpredictable madness that seems to always accompany the stirring of passions. It was only till Rose loved herself enough to demand only pure and unfiltered passionate love that advocate of risk-free love Gregory was transformed into a tweed jacket wearing Romeo. In the end, as conventional love narratives go, they supposedly lived happily ever after.

One is inclined to expect a profound lesson from *The Mirror has Two Faces*—it is, after all, an academic love story; however, the film offers a rather banal one: that knowledge is the hurdle lovers have to surmount to achieve genuine amorous bliss. It is instructive to add that the tension between love and knowledge stands in stark contrast to the rapport between love and stupidity. Stupidity, writes Avital Ronell, is "linked to the most dangerous failures of human endeavors;" yet, the only moment when the prohibitions on stupidity are lifted is when one is in love, a moment in fact when stupidity "sparkles with life."⁵

This essay is an attempt to rethink the fraught relationship of love and knowledge by offering a timely explication of Alain Badiou's thoughts on love. This discourse on love is occasioned by the recent challenge posed by critical theory to rethink love and is animated by the conviction that such a rethinking entails locating love in the domain of thought rather than in a domain beyond cognition and representation. At a time when love is

² Jean-Luc Nancy, *Inoperative Community*, ed. by Peter Connor (Minneapolis and Oxford: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 82.

³ Peter Hallward, *Badiou: A Subject to Truth* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 185.

⁴ *The Mirror has Two Faces*, directed by Barbra Streisand (1996; NY: Sony Pictures, 1998), DVD.

⁵ Avital Ronell, *Stupidity* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 3.

threatened by accusations of being nothing more than a cruel optimism, Badiou's project offers a philosophical defense of love by underscoring its kinship to thought and therefore to truth. It is important to mention, however, that Badiou also redefines truth as a process generated by *events* that occur within a *situation*. Further, events, as far as Badiou is concerned, occur only in four fields: science, art, politics, and love.⁶ In this essay, I begin by outlining the general trajectory of Badiou's philosophy while highlighting and unpacking several crucial terms that are necessary for my explication of Badiou's amorous axiomatics.

Standard among critical expositions of Badiou's work is the inclusion of a tedious discussion of Mathematics, Set Theory in particular (which in turn is often accompanied by some kind of apologetic gesture by the explicator for his/her lack of expertise in Mathematics!). However, I shall proceed with the rather audacious claim that most of Badiou's ideas, even the central ones, may be sufficiently explained with minimal reference to mathematical theory. This gesture follows Alex Callinicos who claims that Badiou's "main philosophical claims can be stated and assessed without a deep immersion in mathematical logic."⁷ But why does Badiou use mathematics as the privileged language of ontology in the first place? For Badiou, "[Mathematics] pronounces what is expressible in being qua being"⁸ for its transpositionality is able to describe the "general situation of all conceivable situations, regardless of their particular contexts or contents."⁹ Following the (sincere) gesture of humility of some of Badiou's explicators, I have to confess my discomfort (alarmingly close to being a phobia) with the mathematics. However, if I may hazard an observation, another reason why I think mathematics works well for Badiou is because its structure and logic functions as a wonderful counterpoint to the unsystematically creative and productively chaotic nature of the event. Although one could use mathematics to formally describe the conditions of an event (i.e. love requires a Two that is not a One plus a One but a One and another One), the eventual appearance of love itself cannot be measured (i.e. it is meaningless to ask "How much love weighs?" or "What is the size of love?"). Putting math aside

⁶ Regarding those four fields, Badiou's foremost explicator Peter Hallward writes: "Because they mark out the possible instances of the subject as variously individual or collective ... Love affects only 'the individuals concerned ...', and it is thus for them [alone that the one-truth produced by their love is an indiscernible part of their existence.] Politics, on the other hand, concerns only the collective dimension ... 'And in 'mixed situations'—situations with an individual vehicle but a collective import—art and science qualify as generic to the degree that they effect a pure invention or discovery beyond the mere transmission of knowledges (*L'Être et l'Événement*, 374 [Cited by Hallward])." See Peter Hallward, *Badiou: A Subject to Truth*, 181.

⁷ Alex Callinicos, *Resources of Critique* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2006), 96.

⁸ Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. by Oliver Feltham (NY: Continuum, 2005), 87.

⁹ Peter Hallward, *Badiou: A Subject to Truth*, 57.

(not to disregard but to occasionally refer to), let me begin my explication of Badiou's ontology.

On Alain Badiou

Many commentators have conferred the title of "Most Important Living French Philosopher" to Alain Badiou.¹⁰ Indeed, the ability of his thought to intervene in questions crucial to both the Analytic and Continental Philosophical traditions displays its generative and enabling power. Yet, at the core of Badiou's philosophy is a straightforward directive: return to Truth. It could be said that the idea that a subject's ethico-political duty is to sustain fidelity to the Truth does not seem strikingly radical or particularly original. Does not Badiou's position simply echo, albeit within the context of advanced capitalism, the Platonic commitment to the Ideal?¹¹ Even the conceptual contours of his "philosophy of the event" bear an uncanny structural similarity to Walter Benjamin's "Theses" (where revolution comes to being not as the conclusion of the logical unfolding of history but as a "catastrophe", a "Messianic cessation of happening"),¹² to Lacan's concept of the Real (which occasionally punctures socio-symbolic reality, disrupting its fluid signifying operations), and even to Levinas's concept of the ethical call of the other (which takes the subject as hostage and binds the subject to a pre-ontological ethical relationship with an absolute alterity that is the other).¹³

It could be argued that part of Badiou's appeal is the well-timed appearance of his thought: his ideas are attractively polemical in a time when dominant persuasions of thought seem restrictive rather than enabling of praxis. Badiou is openly hostile to the dominant orientations in contemporary Theory as well as to the apparently global consensus on matters such as human rights and respect for cultural differences. He positions his work against the three main orientations of contemporary philosophy; that is, Hermeneutic, Poststructuralist/ Postmodern/ Deconstructionist, and

¹⁰ See Burhanuddin Baki, *Badiou's Being and Event and the Mathematics of Set Theory* (London and NY: Bloomsbury, 2014), 1. See also A.J. Bartlett and Justin Clemens, "Introduction: Badiou's Form," in *Alain Badiou: Key Concepts*, ed. by A.J. Bartlett and Justin Clemens (NY and London: Routledge, 2014), 1.

¹¹ Badiou openly expresses his fidelity to Plato. He identifies three things in Plato that directly interest him: (1) Plato's belief that "philosophy begins thinking not in relation to itself but in relation to another discipline (art, mathematics, etc.); (2) the Platonic commitment to the Ideal and the True; and (3) Plato's belief (according to Badiou) that the operation of truth is one of immanence rather than transcendence. See Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* (London: Verso, 2001). See also Hallward, *Badiou: A Subject to Truth*.

¹² Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. by Hannah Arendt (NY: Schocken, 1988), 259-266.

¹³ For a brief survey and critical discussion of the "philosophy of the Event" see Callinicos, *Resources of Critique*.

Analytic/ Epistemological. For Badiou, those orientations of thought share two malevolent characteristics: (1) “the theme of an end, of drawing to a close” (“end of metaphysics”, “end of grand narratives”) and (2) the elevation of language as the site of philosophical thought.¹⁴ Consequently, this leads to a profound suspicion of the idea of truth: the former announces the end of truth; the latter shifts the focus to the questions of meaning rather than the “classical question of truth.”¹⁵ Badiou insists, “language is not the absolute horizon of thought.”¹⁶ He further posits that the emerging moral vocabulary developed within what he calls “ethical ideology” (a way of thinking about relations to the other that is grounded in a “(vaguely) Kantian” universalism and a “(vaguely) Levinasian” respect for difference) is politically unproductive and intrinsically conservative.¹⁷ He believes that Ethics has come to replace (radical) politics: an essentially passive and non-intrusive culture of respect for the other has become preferred over militant activism. He passionately argues that this “ethics of difference,” what he mockingly calls “good old-fashioned tolerance,” has “neither force nor truth.”¹⁸ Ethics, whether “consensual representation of Evil or as concern for the other,” is a form of “resignation in the face of necessity” and “should be designated as nihilism.”¹⁹ Indeed, given the shape of the contemporary world, one cannot help but feel sympathetic to Badiou’s intuition that the now dominant moral ideological formation cloaks a fundamental political impotence.

Ontology: Truth, Situation, Event, Subject

But if truth cannot be established via linguistic propositions, how is it to be encountered?

Contrary to standard poststructuralist theory (and Christianity) that mark the Beginning with the Word, for Badiou, in the beginning there is only the inconsistent pure multiple. There is no structure in the pure multiple; it is not an assemblage of objects because there is yet no concept of “One” — the process of counting has yet to be initiated.²⁰ And, as pure multiplicity, it has no other predicate but its own multiplicity, founded on nothing (a void) rather than on a “One.” This is because, as Slavoj Žižek points out, the pure multiple is not a collection of Ones since “to have One the pure multiple must

¹⁴ Alain Badiou, “Philosophy and Desire,” in *Infinite Thought*, trans. by Oliver Feltham and Justin Clemens (NY: Continuum, 2005), 34.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹⁷ See Peter Hallward, Introduction to Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*.

¹⁸ Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, 20.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 30.

²⁰ Badiou refers to this operation as the count-as-one.

already be “counted as One.” It can thus only appear as nothing, a void: “*nothing* is the name of Being prior to its symbolization.”²¹ The purely multiple is thus untouched by any process of unification.

For something *to be*, that is, for something to exist as an object in (socio-symbolic) reality, it has to be counted as part of what Badiou calls a “situation,” counted as an element of a set, for “all presentation is under the law of the count.”²² For Badiou, a situation is “... a presentation of multiples counted-as-one and brought to the form of a unity.”²³ The situation is thus a “structured presentation” of the indifferent multiplicity. Being emerges when pure multiplicity has undergone the operation of the “count-as-one” and is thus made accessible to knowledge via categorization/ grouping based on its properties, characteristics, and so on. Only elements of the situation are accessible to knowledge because for Badiou “all thought supposes a situation of the thinkable ... a structure, a counting for one, whereby the presented multiple is consistent, numerable.”²⁴

The relationship of “nothing” or the “void,” which is the predicate of purely inconsistent multiplicity, to the situation is a rather special one, relative to the other elements of the situation. Although the void “belongs” to the situation it is not presented as one of its elements; it is present but not presented and consequently not represented. It is what Badiou refers to as the “phantom remainder,” and is that which wanders in the situation in the form of a subtraction of the count.²⁵ But this “phantom remainder” is not merely an indifferent collection of elements passively waiting to be subjected to the structuring operation of the situation. The void, as conceived within Badiou’s “subtractive ontology” is the negative identity of the situation, and “every situation is founded on the void”; it is “what is not there, but what is necessary for anything to be there.”²⁶ Badiou’s use of the term “phantom remainder” does not only describe the uncanny spectral existence of the void in the situation—the void being “the non-place of every place,” that is “neither local nor global, but scattered everywhere, in no place and in every place.”²⁷ The term also calls attention to the way that the non-countable void perpetually haunts the situation, challenging the regime of structured presentation. Badiou writes:

²¹ Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Center of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 1999), 129.

²² Badiou, *Being and Event*, 52.

²³ Gabriel Riera, *Alain Badiou: Philosophy and its Conditions* (NY: SUNY Press, 2005), 8.

²⁴ Badiou, *Being and Event*, 34.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 53.

²⁶ Oliver Feltham and Justin Clemens, Introduction to *Infinite Thought*, 16.

²⁷ Hallward, *Badiou: A Subject to Truth*, 102.

All multiple presentation is exposed to the danger of the void ... It is necessary to prohibit that catastrophe of presentation which would be [the situation's] encounter with its own void, the presentational occurrence of inconsistency as such, or the ruin of the One.²⁸

Because the void exceeds the law of the count in the Situation there is nothing that prevents it from threatening the consistency of presentation (the Situation's "self-evident" Oneness). The Situation cannot depend on its own structure or the count-as-one to ensure consistency because the very operation of the count-as-one is subtracted from presentation, for "a structure exhausts itself in its effect, which is that there is oneness."²⁹

Thus, to prevent the "ruin of the One," the "catastrophe of presentation," a structuring of the structure is required.³⁰ "It is necessary that the structure be structured."³¹ Badiou calls this second structuring principle the "State of the situation." The State is the second order of presentation—that is, representation, and is defined by Badiou as "the "operation which, within the situation, codifies its parts and subsets."³² It is what "discerns, names, classifies, and orders the parts of a situation."³³ Those two levels of structuring—the situation (presented multiplicity) and the State of the situation (codified/ classified/ ordered re-presented multiplicity)—are clearly illustrated in an example Badiou uses in *Being and Event*:

[A] family of people is a presented multiple of the social situation (in the sense that they live together in the same apartment or go on holiday together, etc.), and it is also a represented multiple, a part, in the sense that *each* of its members is registered by the registry office, possesses French nationality, and so on. If, however, one of the members of the family, physically tied to it, is not registered and remains clandestine, and due to this fact never goes out alone, or only in disguise, and so on, it can be said that this family despite being presented is not represented.³⁴

²⁸ Badiou, *Being and Event*, 93.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 95.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 94.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 93.

³² Alain Badiou, *Metapolitics*, trans. by Jason Barker (London and NY: Verso, 2005), 143.

³³ Hallward, *Badiou: A Subject to Truth*, 96.

³⁴ Badiou, *Being and Event*, 174.

Suffice it to say the State is to be distinguished from the original structure of the situation; however, what the State represents as “consistent multiples” is composed only of what the situation presents. Presentation is “on the side of the situation”: Representation is “on the side of the State of the situation.”³⁵

Being for Badiou is this ontological order structured by the situation and the State. It is what is present, could be represented in our horizon of consciousness, and is accessible to knowledge. But if all that is available to consciousness is made possible only by the structuring operation of the situation and the State, how can something authentically new emerge? How is innovation possible? The new cannot emerge from any of the elements of the situation since it is regulated by the structuring power of the State. At best, the State can only represent something as new. The authentically new has to emerge from beyond the sovereign domain of the State and the structured multiple of the situation, from a place of non-Being; that is, the void of the situation. However, if the void is precisely that which is subtracted from presentation, how can its “presence” be made palpable within a situation? How can its traces be made discernible at the level of presentation?

As discussed above, the first level of structuring in the situation (presentation) is always in danger of irruption of the void (hence the need for the second structuring principle that is the State). The void can thus be localized at the level of presentation through “abnormal multiples,” which are “points of subtraction from the State’s re-securing of the count,” located on the “edge of the void.”³⁶ Badiou designates these abnormal multiples as “evental sites.” Evental sites are conditions for the localization of what Badiou calls “events” in a situation. An event is “that-which-is-not-being”; it is an encounter with “the void of the situation ... [and] has absolutely no interest in preserving the status quo as such.”³⁷ The event occurs beyond the domain of established knowledge, thus there is no way to predict where and when an event will take place. It is an “emergence of the New which cannot be reduced to its causes and conditions.”³⁸ Since the event has not been subjected to any “Law of Count” it is, by definition, multiple, but a multiplicity that counts as nothing within its Situation. “[I]t is not, as such, presented, nor is it presentable. It is— not being— supernumerary.”³⁹ That is, it belongs to “that-which-is-not-being-*qua*-being.”⁴⁰ Because it is not

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 103.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 174-175.

³⁷ Hallward, *Badiou: A Subject to Truth*, 114.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 386.

³⁹ Badiou, *Being and Event*, 178.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 189.

discernible in the Situation, the existence of an Event cannot be proven but can only be asserted by a human being who by the very act of fidelity to an Event becomes subjectivized by it. At this point the skeptic may wonder how subjectivization differs from the “count-as-one.” Does not subjectivization grant a singular identity to a human being by defining his or her subjecthood solely as an attachment to an Event? Nevertheless, whether axiomatic or arbitrary, Badiou posits that subjectivization “counts whatever is faithfully connected to the name of the Event.”⁴¹

To an outsider—that is, those not directly a witness to a specific Event—Badiou’s subject would appear to be a rebel without a cause. The Event simply cannot be seen from the vantage point of a Third position, for “[s]ubjectivization takes place in the form of a Two.”⁴² He or she may be able to identify a subject’s act of fidelity to an Event, which is the attempt to give the Event a socio-symbolic existence, but the Event itself, since it belongs to “that-which-is-not-being-*qua*-being” will remain indiscernible. What the outsider sees, and consequently does not recognize, is Truth itself, which in Badiou’s ontology is defined as the “real process of a fidelity to an Event: that which this fidelity *produces* in the Situation.”⁴³ In other words, the outsider cannot integrate what he or she sees in his ways of knowing because what he or she is witnessing is the “new” and not some familiar object simply recast in new ways by reigning systems of knowledge. This is not to suggest, however, that the subject fully assumes the full force of a Truth, but at best only its *trace*, an “approximative truth.”⁴⁴ The subject is only a local configuration; the Truth, however, is universal: “A subject, which realizes a truth, is nevertheless incommensurable with the latter, because the subject is finite, and truth is infinite.”⁴⁵

Amorous Axiomatics: Love as Truth-Procedure

The ostensibly normal state of things then is one of repetition and regulation, and in fact, it is those regulative procedures of a situation that creates the appearance of normality. Systems of ideas that dominate in a specific situation—what Badiou designates as “encyclopeadia”⁴⁶—will only allow the circulation of self-confirming ideas. This means that a situation will not from its own resources produce something genuinely new, for it will compromise the very order that it seeks to regulate. Thus, an event is

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 393.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 393.

⁴³ Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, 42.

⁴⁴ Badiou, *Being and Event*, 397.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 396.

⁴⁶ Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek, *Philosophy in the Present* (UK: Polity Press, 2009), 35.

necessary to usher in the new, and force the components of the situation to come to terms with this radical contingency. Love — which is one of the truth-procedures along with Science, Art, and Politics — is one such instance of the event. Love manufactures its own situation that Badiou calls the “scene of two,” which is composed of a One and another One, an immanent Two.⁴⁷ It is important to distinguish the Two from the couple. Whereas the immanent Two retain their disjunction the couple is a phenomenal appearance visible to a third position that counts the Two as One. The Two is not the sum of ‘one’ and ‘one’ but rather is an immanent Two, which suggests that “there is one position and another position ... totally disjunct from the other.”⁴⁸ Love as a process occurs as a matter of pure contingency when the life of one human being randomly intersects with another, a process that transforms both into Subjects (to truth) — that is, as authentic agents with the potential for action that is not limited nor manipulated by larger structures of power and knowledge. It opens up possibilities for the amorous subjects to see the world anew, from the perspective of the Two instead of from the One. Badiou poetically writes:

When I lean on the shoulder of the woman I love, and can see, let’s say, the peace of twilight over a mountain landscape, gold-green fields, the shadow of trees, black-nosed sheep motionless behind hedges and the sun about to disappear behind craggy peaks, and know — not from the expression of her face, but from within the world as it is — that the woman I love is seeing the same world, and that this convergence is part of the world and that love constitutes precisely, at that very moment, the paradox of an identical difference, then love exists, and promises to continue to exist. The fact is she and I are now incorporated into this unique Subject, the Subject of love that views that panorama of the world through the prism of our difference, so this world can be conceived, be born, and not simply represent what fills my own individual gaze.⁴⁹

It is crucial to highlight the ancillary comment “not from the expression of her face, but from within the world”. Badiou suggests that we should resist the temptation of thinking about love through a Levinasian

⁴⁷ Alain Badiou, “The Scene of Two,” trans. by Barbara P. Fulks, in *The Symptom* 13 (30 May 2012), <<http://www.lacan.com/symptom13/?p=167>>.

⁴⁸ Alain Badiou, *Conditions*, trans. by Steven Corcoran (NY: Continuum, 2008), 187.

⁴⁹ Alain Badiou, *In Praise of Love*, trans. by Peter Bush (NY: New Press, 2012), 25.

framework.⁵⁰ Rather, love should be conceived as an “experience of the world, or of the situation, under the post-evental condition that there were Two.”⁵¹

Badiou develops his philosophy of love by beginning with an enumeration of nonnegotiable rejections. In particular, he rejects “the fusional conception of love” (for love cannot be a procedure that suppresses the multiple in favor of a One), “the ablative concept of love” (for love is not an experience of the Other but an experience of the world/situation), and “the superstructural or illusory conception of love” (for love is not just an ornament to make smooth the clumsy procedure of sexual relations). The conceptual origins of the first two definitions could be traced back to Romantic theories of love, while the third definition echoes Schopenhauer’s philosophy that conceives of love as something manufactured by nature’s will-to-live.⁵² For Badiou, love is a “procedure that makes truth out of the disjunction of sexuated positions.”⁵³ The aforementioned definitions of love sacrifice the production of truth in favor of the rule of the One: the “fusional” conception of love seeks to make a One out of Two; the “ablative,” though attempting to produce an authentic knowledge of the Other, is only able to apprehend the Other as an object (*objet a*) within the coordinates of the subject’s own fantasy (and thus is also caught in the logic of the One); and the “illusory,” makes love a mere pawn in sexuality’s regime.

Badiou arrives at this unique understanding of love through a highly formal process, an axiomatics of love, formulated on the basis of nothing but an “essential conviction.”⁵⁴ He elaborates on his account of love by demonstrating the logical connection among those axioms. Badiou, after all, insists that “No theme requires more pure logic than that of love.”⁵⁵ The four axioms are the following: (1) “There are two positions of the experience of love” (Man and Woman); (2) “The two positions are totally disjunct”; (3) “There is no third position”; and (4) “There is only one humanity.”⁵⁶ Those two positions that Badiou identifies in his first axiom are purely symbolic and have no biological, empirical, and social basis, but are so termed depending on the subject’s relation to the phallic signifier (of wanting *to have* or *to be* the phallus).⁵⁷ Those two positions constitute two wholly separate realms of

⁵⁰ That is, as an ethical relation initiated by the phenomenological encounter with the face that binds the subject to a pre-ontological and infinite responsibility to the other.

⁵¹ Badiou, *Conditions*, 187.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 181.

⁵³ Badiou, *Infinite Thought*, 124.

⁵⁴ Badiou, *Conditions*, 182.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 183.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 183.

⁵⁷ It is instructive to point out that there is a clear homology between Badiou’s “axioms” and Lacan’s theories on the relation (or lack thereof) of the two sexualized positions.

experience, and no real connection between the two positions can be successfully established.⁵⁸ However, although Badiou accepts the Lacanian thesis that the two positions are *absolutely* disjunct, he rejects the conventional reading of Lacan when it comes to the role of love in addressing the disjunction. Numerous Lacanian commentators have interpreted Lacan's famous "Love is that which comes to *supplement* for the lack of a real connection" to mean that love is merely this illusion that functions to make amorous subjects misrecognize their fundamental non-connection. Badiou unpacks Lacan's formula by first interrogating the function of the supplement. By referring to love as a "supplement" Badiou is underscoring his claim that love is not something that belongs to a situation, but something that comes from "outside" it; it is not an element recognized as belonging to a preexisting structure. This properly foreign element opens up possibilities for the amorous subjects of seeing the world anew, from the perspective of the Two instead of from the One. He further argues that if one accepts the thesis that the two sexualized positions are separated by a non-rapport then this non-rapport *cannot* be written, and if it cannot be written, "if it is non-existent as an effect of a structure," it follows that "love itself as supplement can only arrive by chance."⁵⁹ This absolute contingency is crucial in Badiou's project to re-think "love" as a truth-procedure. Love, therefore, is not a relation (in fact, it is born precisely at the point of non-relation); it is a *process* that is "the advent of the Two as such, the scene of Two." Love is the "hypothetical operator" of the accidental collision of two trajectories that is the "event-encounter."⁶⁰

Badiou's third axiom deals with the appearance of the disjunction within situations, what could be called the "announcement of the disjunction."⁶¹ The axiom "There is no third position" suggests that love as a disjunction cannot be witnessed from a situation outside the "scene of two" that love constructs. But from which vantage point then could the amorous truth-event be witnessed? Further, how can love be inscribed in a situation as a "Scene of Two" if no position is available from which love can be witnessed? This is where the notion of the amorous declaration comes into play. Within Badiou's vocabulary this declaration of love is designated as "naming."⁶² And in this gesture of amorous nomination, the truth of the love-event necessarily

Lacanian psychoanalytic theory similarly claims that there are two sexualized positions designated as "Man" and "Woman."

⁵⁸ This is because the Symbolic Order and the Imaginary always mediate sexual relations; thus, subjects cannot transcend the limitations defined by their respective fantasies. Suffice it to recall Lacan's famous pronouncement: "There is no sexual relation."

⁵⁹ Badiou, "The Scene of Two."

⁶⁰ Badiou, *Conditions*, 188.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 184.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 188.

marks itself onto the bodies of the subjects of love, and thus makes itself legible within a socio-symbolic system. Badiou writes, "A Two that proceeds amorously is specifically the name of the disjunct as apprehended in its disjunction."⁶³

While the first three axioms speak about the disjunction of the two positions, the fourth suggests that love is a generic procedure because it addresses only one humanity (and not a specific sexualized position). It must be noted that Badiou subtracted of humanist connotations. He defines humanity as "the historical body of truths" and emphasizes that "all truth holds for all its historical body."⁶⁴ Badiou's fourth axiom creates a paradoxical relation among the axioms. The disjunction of the two positions, Man and Woman, suggests that truths are sexualized (read: there exists a masculine and feminine art/ politics/ love/ science), but the axiom of a single humanity suggests that truths are transpositional. Badiou writes:

If the effects of thesis four are related to the three preceding theses, we can formulate precisely the problem that will occupy us: how is it possible that a truth is transpositional, or a truth for all, if there exists at least two positions, man and woman, that are radically disjunct in regard to experience in general?⁶⁵

The paradox that love produces makes legible the relationship of love to thought. Rather than conceive of love as a place of unity where questions are foreclosed, love becomes a site where the reality of sexual disjunction is negotiated. Love is precisely a process that thinks through the paradox. "Love does not relieve that paradox; it treats it."⁶⁶ Love then is itself the paradox that it treats.

Reading Literature with Badiou

If what Badiou has to say about love *feels* insufficient it is probably because his discussion is more concerned with providing a formal structure of love rather than what that structure might contain. Indeed, for such a method of approaching the topic of love, Terry Eagleton says: "Badiou speaks of love as though it is a self-evident experience, which may be true for Parisians but not for the rest of us."⁶⁷ Peter Hallward comments that it "comes

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 189.

⁶⁴ Badiou, *Conditions*, 184.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 185.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 186.

⁶⁷ Terry Eagleton, *Figures of Dissent* (London and NY: Verso, 2003), 252.

as no surprise that Badiou has had less to say ... about love than about the other generic procedures," for in "the case of love ... such truth is private by definition."⁶⁸ Also, since love is, for Badiou, fundamentally the "truth of the disjunction" it cannot be an object of knowledge: "the experience of the loving subject ... does not constitute any knowledge of love."⁶⁹

It is my conviction—in the spirit of Badiou, who often justifies claims via the force of conviction—that literature may provide clarificatory material to the very formal procedure of love that Badiou outlines.⁷⁰ The passage is from Neil Gaiman's *The Sandman* (1989), which I think beautifully articulates, both as content and as "subtraction," Badiou's ideas on love.

Have you ever been in love? Horrible isn't it? It makes you so vulnerable. It opens your chest and it opens up your heart and it means that someone can get inside you and mess you up. You build up all these defenses, you build up a whole suit of armor, so that nothing can hurt you, then one stupid person, no different from any other stupid person, wanders into your stupid life ... They did something dumb one day like kiss you or smile at you and then your life isn't your own anymore. Love takes hostages.⁷¹

What one immediately notices in the passage is that although it speaks of love there is nothing specifically said about the loved object. No idealization occurs. In fact, we are given almost nothing about the loved object aside from the fact that "she" is a "stupid person, no different from any other stupid person."⁷² A word of caution: "stupid" here is not to be understood as idiotic (although it could partially carry that meaning), for then it would simply operate as a regulative marker within the order of being, a way to classify and categorize elements in a Situation. Rather, "stupid" in this context suggests a person subtracted of any accidental feature or characteristic where desire could attach itself, a person in "her" stupid reality, as opposed to "her" tolerable (yet barred, in the Lacanian sense of the term)

⁶⁸ Hallward, *Badiou: A Subject to Truth*, 185.

⁶⁹ Badiou, *Conditions*, 182.

⁷⁰ Despite Badiou's insistence that literature cannot be a proper scene of representation for love, he nevertheless credits the poet Alberto Caeiro (Fernando Pessoa) for the line "To love is to think."

⁷¹ Neil Gaiman, *The Kindly Ones*, vol. 9 of *The Sandman* (Burbank, CA: Vertigo, DC Comics, 1989).

⁷² I use scare quotes on "she" (and on "her" in the rest of the explication of the passage) to indicate that the loved object occupies the position *W* and does not necessarily indicate a biological or social reality.

Symbolic identity. Subtracted of those accidental features to which desire aims, what remains is the other in his or her stupid reality. Love does not erase the problem of sexual difference; rather, it is testament to the truth of the absolute disjunction of the amorous Two.

Note also that the passage distinguishes between love and desire—that is, love does not have the *objet a*, the object of desire as its cause—while also resisting presenting love as a way of manufacturing an intimate knowledge of the other. Badiou insists that love is not an experience of the other, but an experience of the situation “under the post-evental condition that there were Two.”⁷³ Consequently, it leaves the reader with a sense that love is precisely the absence of a relation, and calls attention to the fundamental gap that separates the amorous subjects. Further, note how the object of love just “wanders” into one’s existence, unanticipated and unexpected. Gaiman represents love as a chance encounter! Its appearance cannot be predicted or calculated within the order of Being, for it is a “disruptive occurrence.”⁷⁴

It also is important to highlight the aleatory nature of the encounter to fully appreciate Badiou’s contribution to the thinking of love. The passage states that the amorous other just haphazardly “wanders” into one’s life. Love is not *represented* as a choice but as “a forced choice.”⁷⁵ Also, is not the mention of erecting “defenses” and donning a “suit of armour” an allusion to the operations of the State of the Situation? The State bars the “phantom remainder” from haunting the Situation so that humans *counted as One* of its elements may harbor illusions of security at the expense of their immortality, their relation to the infinite. Gaiman’s passage beautifully and clearly renders Badiou’s ontological Faustian bargain.

The prior relationship between two beings as designated by the structure of a particular (ordered) situation (defined by terms such as co-workers, classmates, neighbors, friends, strangers, etcetera) will have no bearing on the love that, upon their declaration, will confer to them both the status of subject. Love, for Badiou, creates new worlds! Longtime friends and perfect strangers are both equally suitable candidates to become subjects of love (for as a “generic procedure” love is open to all!). What matters is that the Two recognize the sudden emergence of the amorous event, and that they courageously declare its existence. The declaration makes love legible within the order of being, and its presence is what grants the amorous Two agency, making them proper subjects. To act out of love means that the subject is not acting from the position of the One (which the state of the situation designates), but from the perspective of the Two. Needless to say, the

⁷³ Badiou, *Conditions*, 182.

⁷⁴ Badiou, *Infinite Thought*, 20.

⁷⁵ Žižek, *Sublime Object of Ideology*, 166.

emphasis on the contingency of the amorous encounter makes this passage an apt *representation* of Badiou's understanding of love.⁷⁶

At this point, allow me to introduce a possible complication. The mention of "opening up", "tak[ing] hostages", and "smile" (metonymically, the face) alludes to a Levinasian vocabulary. I suggest that it would be a mistake to read this passage as an articulation of Levinasian ethics. The encounter dramatized here is not an encounter with the "face of the other" that binds the subject to a pre-ontological and infinite responsibility towards it. The speaker, as I have mentioned above, does not directly talk about the other (if anything, the speaker alludes to their fundamental disconnection), but rather, talks about love itself. The speaker suggests a responsibility, albeit hesitant, to the amorous-Event rather than a responsibility to the loved object. This responsibility towards the amorous encounter is nothing more than the fidelity to the Event. Suffice it to recall Badiou's attempt to "preserve the word *ethics*" by reconfiguring it as an "ethic of truth," a tenacious relation to Truth wherein you "do all you can to persevere in that which exceeds your perseverance."⁷⁷

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⁷⁶ I put emphasis on "representation" to indicate that this literary fragment is not consubstantial with an Event—in the way that, say, for Badiou, the poetry of Stéphane Mallarmé constitutes an Event in the domain of Art—but rather only a symbolic enactment of it, a mere scene of *re*-presentation.

⁷⁷ Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, 47.

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