

BOOK REVIEW

RINGING IN THE SHEAVES

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Alain Badiou, *Briefings On Existence: A Short Treatise on Transitory Ontology*, trans. Norman Madarasz, Albany, State University of New York Press, 2006. ISBN: 0791468046

‘We know the name of this risk: it is liberalism, which seeks to untie everything and by this ensnares all in dispersion, competition, opinion and the despotism of the public and publicity’¹

This translation is the eighth book of Alain Badiou’s to appear in English since *Manifesto for Philosophy*, also translated by Norman Madarasz in 1999. If we include the collections of essays and lectures, *Infinite Thought*, *On Beckett* and *Theoretical Writings*, we are up to eleven translated titles in less than six years. And we can expect four more in the next twelve months, not including *Logiques des mondes* (or, as Badiou insists for the English, *Logics of Worlds*).² As telling as the appearance of these translations is, it is also interesting to note that there are almost as many translators. If we include forthcoming titles, we have in fact twelve translators for sixteen titles (most of which are reviewed in this special issue). Twelve is of course a suggestive number for those who, in Badiou’s words, ‘do not constitute a public but support a transmission.’³ Anyway, among these twelve a remarkable subject has unfolded itself: that of a series of translations of works in which the translators have rendered terms and concepts in such a way as to establish them in a general consistency despite the denials and the betrayals inherent to the

1. Alain Badiou, ‘Qu’est-ce qu’une institution philosophique?’ in *Conditions*, Paris, Seuil, 1992, p. 89. This article appears in English for the first time in this issue of *Cosmos and History*. *Briefings On Existence* is abbreviated to TO.

2. See Justin Clemens’ review ‘Had We But Worlds Enough, and Time, This Absolute, Philosopher...’ in this issue of *Cosmos and History*.

3. ‘Qu’est-ce qu’une institution philosophique?’ p. 85.

translator's act.

Doubtless, the vicissitudes of the publishing industry have their effects. Norman Madarasz, our translator here, names two of these effects in his introductory exposition. The first is the time it takes to get to print. Alain Badiou, he says, agreed to give him translation rights in 2001 and SUNY agreed to the translation in the same year. The problems of gestation can mean that bits and pieces escape the whole, and exposition can become redundant.

But it is a second effect that this reviewer finds most curious. This regards the translator's choice of title. Rather than simply render the French title to English, Madarasz, as you see, has relegated this to subtitle status. He is the first of Badiou's translators to make such a decision. In order to justify this choice of 'Briefings On Existence' (which makes me think of underwear), he has recourse to what certainly appears to be, given the avowed commitments of the 'author', a very unBadiouean decision. Madarasz claims that he chose this title as much because 'it refers to the content of the text and the core of its argument' (something uncertain itself), as because 'it appears to me to ring better in a consumerist market that unfortunately has not left the academic press unscathed' (TO 5). As such, 'it don't mean a thing if it ain't got that ring' as the refrain from an old TV commercial had it.

The use of the term 'unfortunately' does curious work. Firstly, why should the academic press be unscathed? What assumptions foster this? Is this some sort of backhanded endorsement of the puerile *entente cordiale* between academia and its paymasters in the state of the capital-parliamentary situation? Or is this one of those passive aggressive statements reflecting that defeatism which can only lament the fact of the subjection of all to the 'fates and fortunes' of market liberalism and as such puts any decision at a distance, as 'out of our hands'. We are meant to sigh, of course, and say 'yes! we understand. What can one do, it is the way of things and so on...'—everyone knows the refrain of virtuous academia versus the grubby world of commerce and the state. Perhaps I am all too paranoid but this concern for the consumerist market and the place of philosophy within it, resounds as even more bizarre when we read in the strange, very strange, preface by Badiou, that in the years after the publication of *L'être et l'événement* he was 'leaping from best seller to best seller!'—exclamation point included. Alain Badiou, coming soon to an airport near you!

So what then of this thing, this 'singular commodity' to quote Badiou's *ironic* take on another piece of translation? Now that *Logiques des mondes* has appeared, this work *Court traité d'ontologie transitoire* (CT) (which I am and am not reviewing), can be verified as the important work that it always was. What is of considerable interest is that the figure of the two permeates this latter work throughout. Situated as it is—along with *Abrégé de métapolitique* and *Petit manuel d'inesshétique*—in the 'valorous passage between the big' as Badiou puts it, thus between *Being and Event* and *Logics of Worlds*, CT marks a point not in a movement between one and an other, but the point at which two can hold fast. The two of 'being appearing' as transitory to the event is the subject of this text and Badiou's elaboration, his sketch for what 'has come', tracks this intrinsic movement in

the thematic design of the work itself. As such, we are treated to what are in fact a series of couples.

As this book is already eight years old, I will give only the briefest of sketches of what lay between the covers. Essentially, in TO we have 14 meditations on questions pertinent to beginning a thinking on appearing which holds fast to the thesis on ontology established in BE. Passing by the Death(s) of God, whose Parmenidean inflections are duly noted, the book begins with the question of how mathematics thinks; that it does, in fact, think. Then we have the event presenting itself on the edge of the void as the illegitimate rupture unrepresentable by a set theory ontology which can nevertheless prescribe its ontological being-there.

Two are meditations on particular ontologies—Deleuze, the vitalist and Spinoza, the closed—both of which go so far and not far enough in Badiou's estimation. Badiou, ever generous to the generic, refuses to indulge in the conceits of refutation and instead thinks alongside these philosophers in order to articulate their intrinsic limits. It is at these points where Badiou, like Plato before him, 'fighting in [the] armour' (or is that *amour*) of the new discoveries in mathematics, intervenes in order to be faithful at once to the thought being thought, *and* to extend its trajectory given the availability of new thought conditions. From Plato's mathematical ontology we then see its 'appearance'—thus its a-voidance—in Aristotelian logic. And we are again treated to a short course on the fundamentals of logic or logic's fundamentals. Then we see logic today as it functions *for* the linguistic turn.

This is an important chapter. In it we see Badiou link (briefly) the disentangling of mathematics from its logicizers (those, that is, who consider mathematics as a logical method expressing no thought) to his critical re-examination of the poem as a resource for thought in its own right. This leads to the beginning of an engagement with Topos theory as the logics of appearing which Badiou seeks to deploy in answer in part to Desanti's demand and *against* its capture within a discourse that considers mathematics to be rightfully logic-icized. A thesis is then put forward regarding the being of number. This is set against and alongside what is, for Badiou, Kant's 'subtractive ontology', an ontology whose limit point is the confusion of constitution and result. We finish off with the coupling of a speculative thesis on group and subject under category theory and the squaring off of being and appearing as preliminary to that which has finally appeared as *Logiques des mondes*.

For those familiar with Badiou's work the introduction to this translation will by turns annoy and frustrate. Madarasz seeks to cover much ground here and ultimately conveys too little of what is essential to a reader of *this* book. There is plenty around today to introduce us to the thought of Badiou. Even had this book been published in 2003, such an 'all things to all people' introduction (which itself includes many particularly contentious readings of Badiou's *oeuvre* presented as certain—i.e. is ontology 'mathematical *philosophy*'?), in the wake of both Hallward's and Barker's texts would have been redundant. What is needed is a short succinct introduction to *this* book, arguing for its singularity and insisting on its importance despite the passing of years and the burgeon-

ing primary and secondary literature. It might also have taken further advantage of the slow gestation to publication by directing ‘veteran’ readers of Badiou to places in the text where questions forged by readings of *Being and Event* might be addressed in this transitory work.

This was perhaps especially necessary, given that, in a book of fourteen chapters, only five are ‘new’ in English. Most have already appeared in the collection by Ray Brassier and Alberto Toscano under the title *Theoretical Writings*.⁴ It is of course a difficult and arduous task to translate a work, and those who await them can only be thankful that some take up this task. In doing so one also puts oneself in a terrible position. It becomes your task to effectively re-present the work which you felt compelled to transmit. Madarasz himself begins his introduction by pointing out that ‘nowhere does an author lose control over his text more than in the translation’. He indicates here that he is referring not so much to the actual words or lines or even a particular book but to the appearance of an *oeuvre*. A point well enough taken, given the ‘order’ in which translated works of Badiou have appeared. However, rather than acknowledgement of the translator’s bind, this reads as a qualification of what is to come. With this translation the consistency mentioned above is broken—and, it seems, for lack of evidence to the contrary, as if it can be attributed to nothing more than idiosyncrasy.

I do not want to bore the reader with translation comparison but there are some terminological decisions which will jar with the reader familiar with Badiou in translation. For example, ‘multiplicité’ and ‘multiple’ are rendered as ‘manifold’—most of the time. What other translators have rendered as ‘state of the situation’ has become ‘situation states’ (described as Badiou’s ‘terminology’). Mallarmé’s *action restreinte* is rendered ‘special action’, a translation this reader has not only never seen before, but which demands of the reader a further act of interpretation entirely unnecessary were it translated as—as it should, nay must be—‘restrained action’. This last is certainly a strange decision given the importance of this notion for Badiou as a poetic illustration of the ethic of a generic truth procedure, an ethics after all modelled on ‘Mallarmé’s method’. ‘Special action’ tells us absolutely nothing in this regard and is so far from what Badiou painstakingly outlines as to be suggestive of an ignorance in regard to Badiou’s project as a whole. Something impossible—and not the case—for someone in Madarasz’s position. To add to the curiousness, in MP Madarasz himself translates *action restreinte* as ‘restrictive action’ (MP 11-12). Although there are several footnotes detailing certain of his other translation decisions, always in regard to retractions of Badiou’s source material, Madarasz unfortunately makes no theoretical argument in his introduction for *his* choices—nor it should be said, for his editorial interventions in the text itself. This reviewer spent a good deal of time attempting to figure out whether there were any, and especially so in regard to the use of ‘manifold’.

It is not just the Brassier and Toscano translations of the same texts that we should

4. The importance of these was well articulated in their unpublished post-face, see Ray Brassier and Alberto Toscano ‘Aleatory Rationalism’, Postface to *Theoretical Writings*, ed. and trans. Ray Brassier and Alberto Toscano, London, Continuum, 2004.

consider in this light. All translators so far, and from what I have seen, to come, maintain what I am calling a consistency in regard to the central terminologies deployed by Badiou. This seems to me conceptually essential. As unreliable as *most* indexes are these days—an exception must be made for the intelligent and comprehensive index to *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis* (see review this issue)—the term ‘manifold’ did not appear in any of the English translations. And given that, for the most part, Badiou’s conceptual elaborations are painstakingly succinct and clear—rendered readable, comprehensible and transmissible despite their obvious theoretical complexity—it makes any such muddying of the waters quite perverse. We are then required to ask, ‘what theoretical shift accounts for such change?’

The *Cambridge Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* under the entry for ‘manifold’ simply refers you to Kant—as you would expect. Alternatively, as it is a term from spatial geometry and the theory of sheaves (and as such figures in Category Theory), I attempted to discern whether the term was being used only when Badiou referred to a particular form of the multiple or a particular understanding of the multiple, for example consistent or inconsistent, that would somehow suggest either a Kantian affinity not before picked up, or an affinity with its deployment in *topos*, but to no avail. A Kantian affinity has of course been much remarked (and rejected) in regard to the ethics but Badiou’s and Kant’s concepts of ‘multiplicity’ are yet to be theoretically established as interchangeable. The problem is that there is no reason for doing so supplied here.

At times, it is more difficult still, as Madarasz does use alongside ‘manifold’ as it were, both ‘multiple’ and ‘multiplicity’. So we have passages where all three are deployed and the reader is left to work it all out. So, for example, we are told that ‘truth itself is a multiplicity’ (‘... qu’en tout cas la vérité elle-même n’est qu’une multiplicité’), ‘...that truth...makes a typical multiple...befall’ (‘...une vérité fait advenir un multiple typique...’), and, just below this, the subtraction of the examination of ‘truths from the simple form of judgement’ [means] ‘to decide upon a single ontology of manifolds’ (décider une ontologie des multiplicités) (TO 62, 59).

Yet the French as we see, gives no sense that a third term is necessary (the plural makes no difference) to distinguish one sense from another. Further, if one checks the Toscano/Brassier version, they have no such concerns translating the terms *multiple* and *multiplicitié* into *multiple* and *multiplicity*, even when the terms are several times deployed within a single paragraph or even a single sentence. This is only one example of many. The picture is again complicated because manifold turns up, by turns, as translation for both *multiple* and *multiplicité*, and again without any specifying context which could lead us to conclude the reasons for the deployment. To make it yet more curious and as in need of an explanation, in the translation of *Manifesto for Philosophy* Madarasz opted for both ‘multiple’ and ‘multiplicity’ *sans* ‘manifold’. The problem for English readers is of course this two-fold affinity that ‘manifold’ carries. In the context of a work dealing with both category theory and Kant’s subtractive ontology, this entails a serious confusion. It is not simply a translation choice but a theoretical intervention.

The translation could have done with a further edit in order to sharpen the read-

ability of the text itself and to clean up anomalies. In chapter 13 ‘Group, Category, Subject’, for example, logical symbols annoyingly fall in and out of italics for no apparent reason and cases similarly appear and disappear. There are some errors in regard to publication dates. *L’Éthique: Essai sur la conscience du mal*, for example, was first published not in 1995 but in 1993, and there is some vagueness in regard to the fact of publications themselves. The introduction implies that prior to the 1999 appearance of *Manifesto for Philosophy*, there were no English translations of Badiou’s work apart from an essay on Beckett. The most notable omissions are the four essays published in *Umbr(a)* in 1996, two from EE and two from *Conditions*. Prior even to these, ‘On a Finally Objectless Subject’ was published in Cadava, Connor and Nancy’s *Who Comes After the Subject* in 1991, and from 1994, ‘The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque’ from Boundas and Olkowski (eds.), *Gilles Deleuze and the Theatre of Philosophy*. Mention should also be made of Peter Hallward’s extensive overview of Badiou as early as 1998, under the title ‘Generic Sovereignty’, published in *Angelaki*.

It must be said that the text does not read well overall. The narrative is clunky and at times just clumsy, such that the reader is forced to retranslate what has been translated: one must address the French in order to understand the English. For example, on the very first page we are confronted with this sentence from ‘God is Dead’: ‘Perhaps was it right after Saint Paul’s sermon that people started making God die in His only real life, that is Christ’s resurrection? This was a unique and decisive victory over death, death as the figure of the Subject, and not of biological objectivity’ (TO 21).⁵ Confronted by this, the reader naturally tries to rearrange the sentence to look for what they must be missing. We could change the word order to ‘perhaps it was right after...’, but the problem is more pronounced. Consider the phrase ‘Saint Paul’s sermon’. One can only ask which one? Or take it as a collective term. Is ‘biological objectivity’ dead or is death not a figure of...? Or..? And this is the sense from the translated work as a whole. I was constantly searching after what I feared I must be missing.

It is important and timely that this book has been published in its entirety. We can better see what it is Badiou proposed eight years ago, and we can read this in light of the situation vis-à-vis Badiou’s *oeuvre*. Indeed, it is now possible, with the exception of *Conditions*, to read Badiou’s texts in English in the order that they appeared in the French, at least from 1988 onwards. This is a crucial achievement.

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5. This is the original: ‘Peut-être dès après la prédication de saint Paul commence-t-on à faire mourir ce qui était la seule vie véritable de Dieu, la résurrection du Christ, unique et décisive victoire enregistrée sur la mort, la mort comme figure du sujet, et non comme objectivité biologique’ (CT 10).

As is fair, I propose, ‘Perhaps it was in the immediate wake of Saint Paul’s teaching that we began to kill that which had been the only genuine life of God, the resurrection of Christ, that unique and decisive victory registered over death; death as figure of the subject and not as biological objectivity’.