Diagonals

Truth-Procedures in Derrida and Badiou

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I

Badiou's relationship to Derrida is complex, ambivalent, at times distinctly fraught, and often—despite an impeccable politeness of phrasing—somewhat impatient in tone. All the same it doesn't exhibit anything like the pattern of routine inter-generational conflict that has characterised so many episodes of post-war French intellectual history. Thus it bears no resemblance to those acts of barely concealed parricidal intent by which Sartre ousted the dominant currencies of pre-war (whether rationalist or Bergson-influenced) thought, or the structuralism of Lévi-Strauss, Althusser and company purported to consign Sartrean existentialism to the dustbin of outworn humanist ideas, or structuralism in turn gave way to the combined assaults of post-structuralists, postmodernists and other such reactive movements. Indeed there is something decidedly majestic about the way that Badiou rises above such manifestations of the short-term *Zeitgeist* or sad displays of the *odium scholasticum* that all too often substitutes for serious debate. His attitude toward Derrida—as evidenced by the brief but revealing encomium collected in the volume *Pocket Pantheon*—is one of admiration mixed with a certain ironic reserve and some

shrewdly aimed though far from hostile remarks about the lack of any direct activist involvement on Derrida's part in the events of May 1968.[1] Even here Badiou is keen to make allowance for the highly mediated character of "deconstructive politics" or the need to approach that topic with a due regard for Derrida's immensely patient, meticulous and painstaking way with texts, among them (if belatedly) the texts of Marx.[2] More than that: he puts the case for Derrida as a political thinker of the first importance, just so long as we read his work with the kind of extreme attentiveness and rigour that he brings to the work of others.

So Badiou is unencumbered by any desire to stake his claim as a replacement *maître à penser* or as one who has seen through the kind of "textualist" mystification that has often been laid at Derrida's door by Marxists, activists, and—from a different through related angle—by Foucault in his early polemical rejoinder.[3] Nevertheless, I shall argue, it is a complex relationship and one that brings out some salient tensions not only between the two thinkers but also within their respective projects. Badiou's answer in the *Pocket Pantheon* essay might well be characterised as a case of interpretative "strong revisionism" as Harold Bloom describes it, that is, a mode of commentary that aims not so much to establish a relationship of fidelity and subservience to the text in hand but rather to transform or trans-value that text in keeping with the commentator's own priorities.[4] Of course this is Badiou's regular practice in the many exegetical chapters of *Being and Event* where he takes a whole roster of the great philosophers from Parmenides, Plato, and Aristotle to Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Kant, Hegel, and their modern progeny—along with

[1] Alain Badiou, *Pocket Pantheon: figures of postwar philosophy*, trans. David Macey (London: Verso, 2009).

[2] Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx: the state of the debt, the work of mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (London: Routledge, 1994).

[3] Michel Foucault, "My Body, This Paper, This Fire," *Oxford Literary Review*, Vol. IV, No. 1 (1979), 9-28.

[4] See for instance Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: a theory of poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).

poets such as Mallarmé and Hölderlin—and subjects them to a reading (mostly in the critical-diagnostic mode) accordant with the book's general thesis.[5] Such reading goes against the intentional grain so as to bring out those symptoms of conflict, internal contradictions, or conceptual stress-points that indicate the workings of a transverse or "diagonal" logic at odds with the overt gist. This is often a matter of showing how the argument turns back against itself and can be seen to undermine its overt commitment to a plenist ontology that would, in effect, preclude any real possibility of change whether in states of mathematical-scientific knowledge, conditions of the body politic, or modes of artistic practice. It involves an alertness to certain symptomatic blind-spots of repression whose existence, once detected, opens the way to a radically different "subtractive" ontology wherein that possibility not only exists but becomes the chief motor or driving force of progress in those various domains.

My reference to Bloom on the process of creative misprision—the way that "strong misreaders" (poets for the most part) absorb and then transform the work of their great dead precursors—needs to be qualified in one major respect. That is to say, Badiou's is a distinctively *philosophical* approach where intellectual creativity goes along with a high degree of conceptual and argumentative rigour and can therefore claim something more in the way of exegetical warrant or justification. I must defer any detailed commentary on the crucial significance of mathematics (more specifically, of developments in set-theory after Cantor) for his thinking about the dialectic of being and event, or the process whereby a given ontology or conceptual scheme comes up against that which radically challenges and eventually transforms its operative scope and limits.[6] What interests me here is the difference between Badiou's deployment of this basically dialectical (or

[5] Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (London: Continuum, 2006).

[6] See Badiou, *Being and Event*; also *Number and Numbers*, trans. Robin Mackay (London: Polity Press, 2008).

immanent-critical) approach as applied to thinkers in the mainstream Western philosophical tradition and his particular take on Derrida's project, involving as it does a more nuanced and delicate negotiation of the differences between them. At one level this has to do mainly with the question of political activism and with Derrida's (as Badiou sees it) very marked disinclination to advance from the stage of intensive engagement with complications in the texts of Western logocentric tradition to the stage of engagement with issues of direct or urgent political concern. At another—though closely related to that—it has to do with Badiou's ambivalent relation to just those practices of textual close-reading, surely epitomised by deconstruction, that offer what he sees as an all too handy pretext for evading or endlessly deferring issues of political commitment.

One would not expect Badiou to single Derrida out for exemption from this particular line of attack. After all, the charge of political evasiveness has very often been laid at Derrida's door by Marxists especially but also by thinkers of a broadly leftist or social-activist persuasion.[7] Moreover, it would fit readily enough with Badiou's emphatic opposition to the "linguistic turn" in its many and varied showings over the past century.[8] These range from the Frege-Russell mode of analytic philosophy or its "ordinary-language" (e.g., Wittgensteinian or Austinian) variants to Heideggerian hermeneutics, post-structuralism, Richard Rorty's "strong" descriptivist brand of neo-pragmatism, Foucault's archaeologies or genealogies of discourse, and postmodernism as theorised—with snippety reference to most of the above—by a thinker like Lyotard.[9] For Badiou, what marks them all out (though some more

[7] See especially Michael Sprinker (ed.), *Ghostly Demarcations: a symposium on Jacques Derrida's* Spectres of Marx (London: Verso, 1999).

[8] For his most forceful statement of this view, see Alain Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy*, trans. Norman Madarasz (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999).

[9] For further discussion of these and allied developments, see Christopher Norris, *The Truth About Postmodernism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993) and *On Truth and Meaning: language, logic and the grounds of belief* (London: Continuum, 2006).

than others) as involving a sheer dereliction of philosophy's proper role is their way of falling back on an appeal to language, discourse, or representation as the ultimate horizon of intelligibility or the end-point of ontological enquiry. However, as I have said, he appears to exempt Derrida from the general charge and to do so for reasons closely connected with his own project. Although these emerge plain to view only in the *Pocket Pantheon* essay—after what must seem a remarkably long period of abstention from anything like a serious or sustained engagement with Derrida—they are likely to possess a revelatory force for suitably attuned readers, and moreover to strike them as casting a powerful retrospective light on crucial aspects of Badiou's work.

At any rate he does his utmost to deflect that blanket charge of Derrida's having raised subtleties of verbal exegesis to a high point of "textualist" mystification which in turn provides a standing excuse for the avoidance of any definite, i.e., any non-deconstrucible commitment in matters of politics. Nor does he subscribe to the other, more specific version of it which holds that the deconstructionist obsession with logical-rhetorical figures like aporia, paradox, undecidability, and so forth, is just what might be expected of a movement so determined to block any process of constructive or problem-solving thought and—beyond that—any prospect of its application to the sorts of problem confronted by theoretically minded political activists. If indeed there is a certain unwillingness to lay that commitment on the line then this should rather be attributed, as Badiou says in the passage already cited in my Introduction, to the kind of "diagonal obstinacy" that typifies Derrida's thought, along with his clearly evinced "dislike of abrupt metaphysically derived divisions" and the fact that his way of brooding productively on fine points of textual interpretation gives rise to a mindset "clearly not suited to stormy times when everything comes under the law of decisiveness, here and now."[10] Of course these phrases carry more than a hint of irony, coming as they do from

[10] Badiou, *Pocket Pantheon*, 138.

one who has unceasingly upheld the good old cause of May 1968 along with the undying political significance of other "failed" or abortive revolutions such as (pre-eminently) the 1871 Paris Commune, and addressed as they are to a thinker whose revolutionary commitments were, to say the least, a great deal more guarded and circumspect.[11] Still the irony is by no means so heavy or censorious as to cancel what is clearly Badiou's genuine appreciation of a thinker whose intellectual temperament, though very different from his own, nevertheless has a fair claim to represent one possible way that a radical intelligence might come to terms with the conflicting pressures of its own time and place.

One should also note, in that phrase "diagonal obstinacy," a more than casual allusion to the role of set-theoretical concepts in Badiou's re-thinking of the relationship between being and event, i.e., the Cantor-derived technique of "diagonalisation" as that which enables thought to conceive and then work with multiple orders or "sizes" of infinity.[12] I shall have more to say in this connection at a later stage but will here just remark on its singular effect when drawn into a discussion of Derrida's work in relation to politics, on the one hand, and to mathematics, logic and the formal sciences on the other. Thus it opens the way for Badiou to enlist Derrida as having arrived at something closely analogous to the formal procedure that Badiou sets out in *Being and Event* and elsewhere, albeit a procedure (that of deconstruction) that makes no explicit appeal to set-theoretical concepts and which operates more through the close-reading of philosophical and other texts. So we should, I think, take Badiou very much at his word—and not (or not merely) as conforming to the old

[11] On this and associated themes, see especially Alain Badiou, *Metapolitics*, trans. Jason Barker (London: Verso, 2005); *Polemics*, trans. Steve Corcoran (London: Verso, 2007); *The Century*, trans. Alberto Toscano (London: Polity Press, 2007).

[12] Badiou, *Being and Event*; also *Infinite Thought: truth and the return to philosophy*, trans. Oliver Feltham and Justin Clemens (London: Continuum, 2003); *Theoretical Writings*, ed. and trans. Ray Brassier and Alberto Toscano (London: Continuum, 2004).

French custom of high-toned testamentary tributes—when he declares that he will henceforth emulate Derrida's famous punning neologism *différance* (= difference/deferral/deference) by likewise substituting an anomalous *a* for the "correct" letter *e* in the final syllable of his own key-word *inexistence*.[13] Just as *différance* functions in Derrida's texts as a signifier of that which eludes any possibility of conceptual closure or univocal definition so *inexistance* will function in Badiou's texts as a pointedly apt designation of that which eludes the mathematical, scientific, or socio-political count-as-one. It is the term for whatever "inexists" or finds no place within some given situation or state of knowledge, whether through being denied any form of effective political representation (like the "paperless" North African immigrant workers in France) or through figuring nowhere in the currently accredited tally of beliefs, propositions, or truth-claims.[14] Thus, for Badiou, "the wager of Derrida's work, of his infinite work, . . . is to *inscribe the inexistent*." If that word has acquired its deviant spelling by the end of Badiou's short essay then this is no mere linguistic *jeu d'esprit*—any more than with Derrida's numerous inventive yet philosophically load-bearing neologisms—but a shift brought about strictly in consequence of certain precise and far-reaching analogies between their two projects.

There is further evidence of this when the passage just cited brings together a markedly Derridean inscriptionalist or textual idiom with a thoroughly Badiouan appeal to the range of conceptual resources opened up by Cantor's exemplary passage through and beyond the paradoxes of traditional thinking about the infinite. Thus the reference to Derrida's "infinite work" of inscribing the inexistent is no idle compliment or piece of neatly turned phraseology but rather a precisely gauged evocation of the link between Badiou's set-theoretically inspired re-thinking of ontologi-

[13] See Jacques Derrida, "Différance," in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 3-27.

[14] For his full-scale philosophical treatment of this theme, see Alain Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, trans. Alberto Toscano (London: Continuum, 2009).

cal issues and Derrida's less formally explicit but, in their own way, just as rigorous deconstructive procedures. This is most likely why Badiou exempts Derrida from his otherwise sweeping condemnation of the linguistic turn in its sundry current guises as merely an update on old sophistical or cultural-relativist themes. What is crucially different about Derrida's commentaries on canonical texts from Plato to Husserl is his relentless teasing-out of aporetic or contradictory chains of logical implication which can then be seen to pose a large problem to any orthodox or fideist account.[15] Such are those conflicts that arise between the *vouloir-dire* of authorial intent and that which a text is logically constrained to signify when examined with a readiness to track certain discrepant details that challenge or subvert more conventional protocols of reading. The result may very well go against not only our best evidence of what the writer expressly, consciously or knowingly meant to say but also the weight of received exegetical wisdom as well as, very often, our intuitive sense of interpretative validity or truth. Hence the elusive yet marked affinity between Derrida's way with texts—his "patient deconstruction of oppositions" as Badiou puts it, not without a certain muted irony—and Badiou's approach to the various thinkers (philosophers and poets) whose work he subjects to a form of immanent dialectical critique. Where they differ is chiefly in Derrida's far greater emphasis on textual close-reading or exegesis as the means to locate those tensions, aporias, or moments of undecidability when classical (bivalent or true/false) logic is forced up against its limits. In Badiou, the procedure is pursued to broadly similar ends—with a view to exposing the covert implications, the suppressed premises or (in Derrida's phrase) the "unthought

[15] For some classic examples, see Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. David B. Allison (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973); *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri. C. Spivak (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974); *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978); *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (London: Athlone Press, 1981); *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

axiomatics" of a dominant tradition—but more by way of conceptual analysis than through a sedulous attention to details of the text.

II

In this respect Badiou may be said to stand closer to Adorno, or negative dialectics in its first-generation Frankfurt mode, than to any version of the well-nigh ubiquitous linguistic turn that has undeniably left a strong imprint on Derrida's work.[16] (Although Badiou is notably out of sympathy with Adorno as regards the latter's critique of Wagnerian music-drama this is in a highly specific context of debate and scarcely indicative of any deeper-lying or principled opposition to that mode of thought.[17]) And yet, as emerges to striking (even moving) effect, Badiou is attracted not only by the rigour of Derrida's work but also—what might seem at odds with that—by its quest for alternative, less sharply polarised terms of address or some means to shift argumentative ground from a downright clash of contradictory logics (within the text or amongst its commentators) to a "space of flight," as Badiou describes it, beyond all those vexing antinomies.

> You take, for example, the great metaphysical oppositions. We shall have to diagonalize them. Because restricting discursive space means leaving no massivity, no linear massivity. Binary oppositions cannot possibly locate the hors-lieu in any lieu. So, we will have to deconstruct them. We will have to cut across them. That is what deconstruction is. Deconstruction is, basically, the set of operations that can bring about a certain restriction of the space of flight, or of the space of the vanishing point.[18]

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[16] See especially Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York: Seabury Press, 1973).

[17] Alain Badiou, *Five Lessons on Wagner*, trans. Susan Spitzer (London: Verso, 2010); Theodor W. Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Verso, 2005).

[18] Badiou, *Pocket Pantheon*, 136.

"Restriction," that is, in so far as it places certain definite limits on the space for manoeuvre as concerns this or that particular text, or again—more precisely—on what should count as a warranted claim with regard to those specific complications of sense, reference and logic that result from a properly deconstructive reading. Hence the well-known passages (in *Of Grammatology* and elsewhere) that find Derrida emphatically asserting the need to respect indications of authorial intent so far as possible while none the less remaining maximally alert to those symptoms of conceptual stress that signal the presence of a counter-logic at odds with the text's overt (intentional) purport.[19] Indeed, as Badiou very pointedly remarks, it is just this Derridean preference for re-inscribing (that is, first inverting then displacing) certain kinds of binary opposition that is most characteristic not only of deconstruction as a formal procedure or practice of textual close-reading but also of Derrida's mode of address to political and ethical themes. So we should not take it as a cunning backhander—or a case of praising with faint damns—when Badiou refers to Derrida's having been "kept apart from the truth of the red years between 1968 and 1976," and when he further explains that the truth in question "spoke its name with the words: One divides into two."[20]

No doubt Badiou is here staking his own militant distance from any such conflict-avoidance strategy, as well as signalling for those in the know that this political difference goes along with an equally decisive difference in terms of their respective commitments with regard to certain aspects of the relation between language, truth and logic. Of course it is not the case that these two utterly distinctive thinkers are at bottom saying the same thing, the one (Derrida) in linguistically oriented or "textualist" and the other (Badiou) in mathematically derived or formalist terms. Yet one should, I think, take Badiou at his word in the *Pocket Pantheon* essay when he allows that some thinkers—those, like Derrida, with

[19] See especially Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 157-8.

[20] Badiou, *Pocket Pantheon*, 138.

sufficient exegetical as well as political patience—can and should pursue the other, basically non-confrontational path. Moreover one can see how this way of thinking, or something very like it, played a role in the development of Badiou's ideas from the binary-dominated concepts and categories of *Being and Event* to the more nuanced, differential understanding of the relationship between being and existence that typifies *Logics of Worlds*.

> When Derrida outlines the concept of "différance" he wants to suggest a single term that can activate the being/existence distinction in its vanishing point. Derrida *puts to flight* what remains of a metaphysical opposition in the being/existence difference in such a way that we can grasp difference as such, *in its act*. And différance in action is obviously that which stands at the vanishing point of any opposition between being and existent, that which cannot in any sense be reduced to the figure of that opposition. And then we have to examine the democracy/totalitarianism opposition in the same way. Or the real impact of the Jew/Arab opposition on the Palestinian conflict. When he takes a stance on the Jew/Arab opposition in the Palestinian conflict, he once again deconstructs its duality.[21]

This makes it very clear how close are the links, as Badiou perceives them, on the one hand between Derrida's early and his later (more overtly political) writings, and on the other between Derrida's work as a whole and Badiou's critical ontology—his conception of the being/event dialectic—as it moved toward the more stratified or nuanced account laid out in *Logics of Worlds*.

So we shouldn't too easily fall in with the idea that these two thinkers stand squarely apart as regards the single most divisive issue in present-day philosophy of language and logic. It is not just a matter of situating each of them at some point on a scale that runs from the language-first proposition, i.e., that any critique of prevalent ("logocentric") ideas must always take account of its own embededness in a certain

[21] Badiou, *Pocket Pantheon*, 137-8.

cultural-linguistic milieu or tradition, to the logicist claim that such critique has to start with a strenuous rejection of the turn toward language as—supposedly—the ultimate limit or horizon of intelligibility. This is basically the same issue that divides continental thinkers of a strongly hermeneutic or language-centred orientation such as Heidegger and Gadamer from those, like Adorno or Habermas, who whatever their otherwise sharp differences agree on the need for a critical approach that holds out against received ideas and their customary modes of expression. From the latter viewpoint it is a *sine qua non* of enlightened or progressive thought that it should always maintain the utmost vigilance with regard to those ingrained habits of belief that may always turn out to have been kept in place by the inertial force of communal usage or linguistically encoded prejudice. On this account the true dividing-line falls not, as the textbook story would have it, between (so-called) continental and (so-called) analytic philosophy but rather between those thinkers on either side who pretty much go along with the linguistic turn for all practical purposes and those others who reject it on philosophical, political, or ethical grounds.[22] Nobody who has read Badiou's *Manifesto for Philosophy* or registered the impact of his forceful reflections on the prevalence of latter-day "sophistry"—especially where influenced by Wittgenstein—could be in any doubt as regards his deep and principled aversion to this whole movement of thought. Worst of all, in his view, is the way that it precludes any substantive critique of existing beliefs, values, or truth-claims by declaring that such criticism has to make sense by the lights of some communal consensus or cultural life-form which would otherwise find it unacceptable or downright unintelligible.

One can therefore see why Badiou's readings of (among others) Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Hegel, and Heidegger proceed more directly through a critical engagement with the conceptual and argumentative structures

[22] For further discussion see Christopher Norris, *Minding the Gap: epistemology and philosophy of science in the two traditions* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000).

of their thought and not, as in Derrida, through a practice of meticulous textual close-reading. Of course it is then open for any Derridean to ask how Badiou could possibly advance his strong-revisionist claims—for instance, his subversion of the plenist ontology or the static and immobile concept of being endorsed by a thinkers from Parmenides to Spinoza—unless through a rigorous textual analysis that locates and deconstructs those specific passages where the doctrine in question can be shown to encounter certain problems unresolvable on its own express terms.[23] And indeed it is the case that Badiou arrives at his unsettling conclusions through some careful and detailed as well as critically acute and markedly heterodox readings. Still there is a difference between, on the one hand, Derridean close-reading where the problems emerge in and through a process of direct engagement with the text and, on the other, Badiou's mode of dialectical critique which takes for granted the text's having been read with adequate attention to detail and which thus—on the strength of that previous engagement—presumes the entitlement to argue its case at a certain level of abstraction from the kinds of exegetical detail required of an *echt*-deconstructive approach. One motivating factor here, as I have said, is Badiou's opposition to anything—any argument, theory, or school of thought—that goes along with the linguistic turn or the notion of language as an end-point of critical enquiry. This helps to explain his ambivalence toward Derrida's work despite their both being centrally concerned to expose the symptomatic blind-spots, aporias, or conflicts between manifest and latent sense which reveal the limits of a certain restrictive ontology (Badiou) or a certain logocentric "metaphysics of presence" (Derrida) whose liability to such disruptive effects is an index of its deeply ideological character.

This kinship emerges with unmistakeable force if one compares, say, Badiou's strongly heterodox yet rigorously consequent readings of Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, or Heidegger with Derrida's no less strenu-

[23] Badiou, *Being and Event*, 112-20.

ously argued deconstructive commentaries on those same thinkers.[24] In Derrida it is chiefly a matter of revealing the various deviant, non-classical, or paraconsistent logics that can be shown to inhabit their texts and produce those moments of undecidability—aporias, in the strict sense of the term—which call into question certain of the author's leading premises or presuppositions.[25] If the *modus operandi* is that of textual close-reading then this should not be seen as consigning Derrida's work to the realm of literary criticism or applied rhetoric but rather as offering the means to make that case with a high degree of demonstrative force and with reference to certain highly specific contexts of argument. In Badiou, it is a chiefly a matter of showing how certain overt ontological commitments—those that endorse some version of a plenist or changeless, timeless, and wholly determinate ontology—are fissured by the need to introduce an anomalous term that implicitly concedes the problematical status of any such doctrine and its covert reliance on that which it has striven to keep off bounds. This is why Badiou devotes a large portion of his commentary in the early sections of *Being and Event* to a detailed rehearsal of the issue of the one and the many as raised to intensely thought-provoking though somewhat baffled effect in Plato's dialogue *Parmenides*.[26] What emerges here is the conceptual impossibility of thinking an absolute plenitude of being—an absolute dominion of the one over the many, or of the timeless and unchanging over everything subject to time and change—and hence the need (so deeply repugnant to Plato's idealist mind-set) to reckon with this in any workable theory of truth and knowledge.

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[24] Badiou, *Being and Event*; also entries for Derrida under Note 15, above.

[25] See Graham Priest, "Derrida and Self-Reference," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 72 (1994), 103-111 and *Beyond the Limits of Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); also Christopher Norris, "Derrida on Rousseau: deconstruction as philosophy of logic," in *Language, Logic and Epistemology: a modal-realist approach* (London: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2004), 16-65.

[26] Badiou, "Being: Multiple and Void. Plato/Cantor," in *Being and Event*, 21-77; also "The Subtraction of Truth," in *Theoretical Writings*, 95-160.

Thus Badiou sees a strong proleptic link between Plato's reflections on that topic and the subsequent history of more or less bewildered attempts, on the part of philosophers and mathematicians, to get a grip on the concept of the infinite as something more than a merely notional, virtual, or placeholder term.[27] His reading of intellectual history is premised on the claim that what Cantor eventually achieved—an operational grasp of the infinite and its multiple "sizes" or cardinalities—was there already as a readable subtext to the vexing antinomies of Plato's dialogue and was then worked out through numerous episodes in the long history of subsequent attempts to resolve them. Only with Cantor did these dilemmas, supposedly endemic to any thinking about the infinite, at last give way to a conception that would "turn paradox into concept" or transform what had so far been a cause of intellectual anxiety into a source of knowledge-transformative insights not only in mathematics but (so Badiou maintains) with respect to basic ontological questions across the whole range of scientific, social, and humanistic disciplines. What Cantor's discovery made it possible to think was the concept (not merely the idea) that there existed multiple orders of the infinite—such as the infinity of integers and even numbers, or integers and fractions thereof, or rational and real numbers—and, moreover, that these could be reckoned with or subject to calculation in rigorous and perfectly intelligible ways. The effect was to open up a vast new region of transfinite operations that David Hilbert famously described as "a mathematician's paradise," and which finally laid to rest those deep misgivings about the topic that had typified the response of many thinkers from Plato and Aristotle down to Cantor's more orthodox-minded contemporaries.[28] So it was that his breakthrough soon gave rise to a whole range of pow-

[27] Plato, *Parmenides*, trans. Mary L Gill and Paul Ryan (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1966).

[28] On the often heated debate around Cantor's claims concerning the multiple "sizes" of infinity and Hilbert's enthusiastic endorsement, see especially Marcus Giaquinto, *The Search for Certainty: a philosophical account of the foundations of mathematics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

erful techniques for creating (or discovering, as mathematical realists would say) new possibilities of further extending the set-theoretical domain.

Plato's worry is conveyed in the dialogue through Socrates' encounter with his senior and mentor Parmenides. It has to do with the way that reflection on the infinite tends to generate problems, dilemmas, aporias, or instances of limit-point paradox which pose a real threat to the kind of thinking—the pursuit of a well-defined systematic structure for the conduct of rational enquiry—that philosophers have typically espoused. The result of this encounter is to force Socrates and his admiring, ever-faithful, yet at this point discernibly independent-minded student and chronicler Plato into a sequence of hard-pressed dialectical manoeuvres on the theme of the one and the many that leads both thinkers, like many others after them, right up to and (arguably) just beyond the point of conceptual deadlock. Thus the dialogue, at least as Plato reconstructs it, brings Socrates out decidedly at odds with Parmenides' doctrine that only the one can truly be said to exist while the multiple is merely a product of delusory phenomenal or sensuous experience. Instead it is seen to manifest an incipient grasp of the contrary truth according to which multiplicity precedes and outruns any limit arbitrarily placed upon it by this or that particular state of knowledge, ontological scheme, discursive regime, or appearance of consistency brought about by some local operation of the merely stipulative count-as-one. This the dialogue achieves despite and against Plato's well-known predilection for the transcendent unifying power of that which participates in the abstract realm of the forms, or ideas, such as justice, beauty, and (ultimately) goodness. In short, "[w]hat Plato is endeavouring to think here, in a magnificent, dense text, is evidently inconsistent multiplicity, which is to say, pure presentation, anterior to any one-effect, or to any structure."[29] And again, in a pithy formulation by Badiou that very clearly credits Plato with a precocious (perhaps preconscious) attempt to make

[29] Badiou, *Being and Event*, 33.

sense of that thesis: "in the absence of any being of the one, the multiple in-consists in the presentation of a multiple of multiples without any foundational stopping-point."[30]

"In-consists" is here used in the pointedly technical sense developed throughout *Being and Event*. What the neologism nicely and compactly denotes is that absolute precedence of the multiple over the one—or the inconsistent over the consistent—which plays a central role in Badiou's thinking not only about mathematics but also on other topics central to his work, among them most importantly politics. This he conceives as elementally a matter of the count-as-one and its exclusionary effect when deployed to distinguish some socially dominant fraction of the populace as members in good standing and to marginalise or negate some other fraction (for instance, that of the *sans papiers* or "economic migrants") as lacking such status.[31] Nevertheless, just as Plato's "official" (Parmenidean) doctrine of transcendental monism encountered resistance from certain inbuilt necessities of thought—a resistance that would finally give rise to Cantor's conceptual breakthrough—so likewise those oppressed or victimised minorities exert a counter-pressure at certain points in the existing body politic which at critical times may become the sites of protest, struggle, and (potentially) social transformation. Thus, in terms of the more-than-analogical relation that Badiou posits between set theory and politics, any such change is likeliest to start at "evental sites" where conditions exist for the emergence of an aberrant or "uncounted" multiple, that is, a collectivity—something like Sartre's "group-in-fusion"—with a shared interest in bringing it about.[32] These are subject-multiples who "belong" but are not "included," or owing to whose conspicuous absence from

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[30] Badiou, *Being and Event*, 33.

[31] See Note 11, above.

[32] Jean-Paul Sartre, *A Critique of Dialectical Reason*, Vol. 1, *Theory of Practical Ensembles*, trans. A. Sheridan-Smith (London: New Left Books, 1976) and Vol. 2, trans. Quintin Hoare (London: Verso, 2006); also Badiou, "Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980)," in *Pocket Pantheon*, 14-35.

the count-as-one the extant social structure can be known to "inconsist," i.e., to harbour absences (defects of adequate representation or shortfalls of accountability) that call its legitimacy into question.

This is all worked out with great precision and care for detail in Badiou's writings on the course of set-theoretical investigation after Cantor. It is expounded chiefly with reference to the work of Paul Cohen who devised (or discovered) a formal means of explaining how certain as-yet unknowable or unprovable truths in mathematics might none the less be implicit through their absence from the present state of knowledge and the power of that absence to generate certain specific problems and aporias.[33] Here again, as so often with Badiou, the Sartre comparison—famously exemplified by Pierre's absence from the café—is one that fairly leaps to mind.[34]

I hope that by now it will be clear what I am suggesting with regard to the relationship between Badiou and Derrida. There is no doubt that Badiou is the more overtly formal thinker, or the one whose work has drawn more heavily on developments in mathematics, logic, and the formal sciences. There is also no doubt that Derrida is the more language-oriented or text-conscious thinker of the two, a difference that might seem to set them apart on basic philosophical grounds. However, to repeat, this impression ought to be checked by considering the well-nigh ubiquitous character of the "linguistic turn" across numerous schools of post-1920 "analytic" and "continental" thought. One effect of this—for thinkers not overly in hock to that typecast dichotomy—has been to question the very idea that an extreme sensitivity to linguistic nuance cannot go along with (must indeed be inimical to) an adequate power of conceptual grasp. Nor should it be forgotten, as so often it has by admiring and hostile commentators alike, that

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[33] Paul J. Cohen, *Set Theory and the Continuum Hypothesis* (New York: W.A. Benjamin, 1966). See also Michael Potter, *Set Theory and Its Philosophy: a critical history* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

[34] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel Barnes (London: Routledge, 2003), 9.

Derrida more than once invokes formal arguments such as Gödel's undecidability-theorem in order to explain what is involved in the deconstructive reading of a text.[35] This is not just a vaguely analogical or downright opportunist appeal to the presumed authority of mathematics and logic but a reference-point that precisely captures the movement—the logico-syntactic-semantic procedure—of Derrida's classic readings.

III

My point is that Derrida's meditations on the logics of the *pharmakon* in Plato, of supplementarity in Rousseau, of parergonality in Kant, or of *différance* in Husserl along with his later, more generic reflections on the aporetic logics of the gift, hospitality, and auto-immunity are all of them essentially formal despite (or more accurately just on account of) their often starting out from some localised evidence of textual complication.[36] That is, they have to do with the scope and limits of classical (bivalent) logic—its coming up against strictly unresolvable instances of self-contradiction or aporia—and are therefore dependent on textual exegesis *only though crucially* in order to present this case with the maximum degree of evidential warrant and demonstrative (logical) rigour.

Indeed, one could plausibly interpret the development of Derrida's thought over five decades of intense activity as a

[35] See Note 27, above; also Paul Livingston, "Derrida and Formal Logic: formalizing the undecidable," *Derrida Today*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (2010), 221-39 and Norris, "Deconstruction, Science and the Logic of Enquiry," 178-200.

[36] See entries under Note 15, above, and Jacques Derrida, "The Parergon," in *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 15-147; also—for the more obviously "topical" turn in his later work—Jacques Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, trans. Rachel Bowlby (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000); *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, trans. Mark Dooley and Michael Hughes (London: Routledge, 2001); *Rogues: two essays on reason*, trans Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford U.P., 2005); *Beast and the Sovereign*, Vol. 1, ed. Michel Lisse, Marie-Louise Mallet, and Ginette Michaud, trans. G. Bennington (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

shift of focus from textual close-reading as the *sine qua non* of interpretative truth or validity to a somewhat more generalised or less context-specific mode of conceptual analysis. I have ventured this claim in somewhat cautious and tentative style because it is misleading in one respect at least, namely its failure to acknowledge the wider (referential or real-world) contexts to which those later writings are very specifically addressed and to which they often respond in strongly marked ethico-political terms.[37] Here again, as with the (putative) issue concerning "formal" *versus* "textualist" modes of thought, if one takes due account of this dimension—always present in Derrida's work but latterly more overt and emphatic—there will seem fewer problems about finding significant points of contact between that work and various aspects of Badiou's project. It will then become clearer that their thinking converges on certain shared objectives, among them the concern to articulate a formally adequate account of the contradictions that they both find implicit across a great range of discourses, concepts, institutions, socio-political orders, and practices. Moreover, they can then be seen as holding the shared belief that those contradictions have their locus of emergence only in the various specific contexts—from mathematics, logic and the physical sciences to politics, ethics, and art—where thinkers and practitioners must henceforth discover the relevant validity-conditions as well as an anticipatory grasp of what would truthfully count as an advance on the present state of knowledge or current ideas of justificatory warrant.

All this was implicit in the well-known aphorism of Roland Barthes when he sought some common ground between structuralists and their Marxist or socialist-realist opponents by remarking that "a little formalism turns one away from history, but a lot brings one back to it."[38] What I think he had more specifically in mind—and what bears directly on our current

[37] See Notes 2 and 38, above; also Cathy Caruth and Deborah Esch (eds.), *Critical Encounters: reference and responsibility in deconstructive writing* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1995).

[38] Roland Barthes, "Myth Today," in *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (London: Granada, 1973), 112.

discussion—is the difference between a wholesale version of the "linguistic turn" (whether post-structuralist, Wittgensteinian, late-Heideggerian, or Rortian neo-pragmatist) and a version that concedes the centrality of language to human thought and cognition yet also acknowledges the constraints imposed by logic on the one hand and referential ties or commitments on the other. Thus a formalist approach is one that preserves at least this much of the classical *trivium* model with its three major disciplines of logic, grammar, and rhetoric. The model was devised so as to allow rhetoric its appointed place as the study of language in its suasive or performative aspect but always within the order of priority laid down by a due regard for logic and, next to that, for grammar as the structural component of language that serves to articulate its proper relation to the correspondent structures of truth, fact, or veridical knowledge and experience. It was subject to drastic revision through various programmes of reform from Ramus down, and is nowadays either consigned to the intellectual history-books or resurrected by boa-deconstructors like Paul de Man in order to advance a radically extended conception of rhetoric that would claim to undo—subvert or undermine—the priority of logic and grammar.[39]

Whatever one's assessment of de Man's somewhat wire-drawn arguments to this effect it is clear that the *trivium* conception suffers from an overly literal understanding of the correspondence-relation between logic, language and reality and a failure to conceive how that relation might be subject to disturbance by factors beyond the remit of logical or grammatical analysis. Still it is the model that looms over Wittgenstein's early Tractarian account of these matters, and also—of course—the model that he roundly rejected in the *Philosophical Investigations* and other "late"-period writings.[40]

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[39] For further discussion (albeit from a decidedly idiosyncratic angle) see Paul de Man, *The Resistance to Theory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986); also Christopher Norris, *Paul de Man and the Critique of Aesthetic Ideology* (New York: Routledge, 1988).

[40] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. David Pears and Brian McGuiness (London: Routledge, 1961) and *Philosophical Investigations*,

Wittgenstein's was the most extreme—arguably the most naïve and literal-minded—of those doctrines that typified analytic philosophy in its early, predominantly logicist period. His subsequent turnaround was likewise the most extreme of those sundry reactive movements of thought which swung right across to a notion of language (language-games, discourses, phrase-regimes, descriptive paradigms, worldviews, conceptual schemes, etc.) as the furthest we can get toward a better understanding of the relation between thought and world.[41] It is in this context that Badiou and Derrida can be seen to hold out against the limiting conditions imposed on philosophy by a cyclic swinging back and forth between opposite and equally disabling doctrinal poles. Both thinkers maintain a steady commitment to standards of logical consistency and analytic-conceptual rigour along with an acute critical awareness of the ways in which certain problematic or anomalous instances—"events" for Badiou, aporias or moments of undecidability for Derrida—may on occasion require a suspension and consequent redefinition of those same standards.

Badiou focuses on the effect of some crucial intervention in mathematics, science, politics, or art which establishes a novel truth-procedure whose longer-term consequences are then worked out by "militants of truth"—or those with the requisite degree of post-evental fidelity—and brought to the point where there occurs a decisive transformation in the existing order of knowledge, society, or artistic expression. Derrida is more apt to describe such events in textual terms, that is to say, as likewise transformative occurrences but of the sort best exemplified by what happens when a deconstructive reading of (say) Plato, Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Husserl or Heidegger controverts not only the received understanding of those thinkers but also its bearing on issues in the sphere of general and regional ontology. Indeed there

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trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1954).

[41] See entries under Note 9, above, for more extended analysis and critique of these various (as I see them) closely related developments.

are some major misconceptions about Derrida that might be dispelled by noting the salient points of convergence between his project and Badiou's more explicitly ontological approach to the ongoing dialectic of being and event. One is the old canard, still much bandied about amongst Derrida's detractors, that in making his notorious claim to the effect that "there is nothing outside the text" ("*il n'y a pas de hors-texte*;" better rendered "there is no 'outside' to the text") he should be taken to espouse a textualist variant of absolute or transcendental idealism according to which, quite literally, written marks on the page are all that can be known to exist.[42] Another is the notion often advanced by critics on the left that when Derrida claims to deconstruct the Western logocentric "metaphysics of presence" from Plato to Heidegger he must have in mind some timeless and seamless structure of false consciousness—or mode of self-perpetuating error and delusion—that has remained perfectly unaffected by even the most radical interim changes of socio-political life.[43] My comparison with Badiou may help to make the contrary point, i.e., that each of those textual engagements raises a historically specific range of issues which in turn have to do with a particular form of ideological misrecognition or a distinct, politically inflected way that the logocentric prejudice has taken hold under given material and cultural conditions. In short the main task of critical reading, as Derrida conceives it, is precisely to articulate those fault-lines in the structure of metaphysical presupposition that are normally concealed by our placid assurance of knowing our way around language and the world but which show up to most striking effect when placed under deconstructive scrutiny.

Nor should this for one moment be taken to suggest that Derrida is proposing linguistic therapy in the Wittgensteinian mode, i.e., seeking to talk us down from the giddy heights of metaphysical abstraction and restore us to a communally

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[42] Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 158; also Note 38, above.

[43] See Note 7, above.

sanctioned sense of what constitutes apt or proper usage.[44] One additional benefit of viewing his work in relation to Badiou's is that it shows just how far they share a decidedly anti-Wittgensteinian emphasis on the power of critical thought to question, challenge, unsettle and subvert the complacent habits of belief typically enshrined in (so-called) ordinary language. This in turn allows both thinkers to locate a certain very specific role for the subject—the human subject of choice, agency, knowledge, and commitment albeit here defined in terms far removed from those of traditional humanism—as that which alone brings about the possibility of any such critical advance. Such is Badiou's concept of the subject as itself brought about or summoned into being through its faithful adherence to a truth-procedure in the wake of some particular breakthrough event in mathematics, the sciences, politics, or art.[45] Beyond that, it suggests perhaps the most promising solution to those long-running and by now somewhat dead-end debates over whether or not Derridean deconstruction goes so far in its (supposed) rejection of all such (supposed) humanist residues as to leave no room for the subject as locus of truth-seeking and activist engagement.[46] That is to say, it gets over the false antinomy—one very pointedly deconstructed in Derrida's early writings on Husserl—between truth as a matter of absolute ideal objectivity and truth as that which has to be conceived as discovered or at any rate discoverable by human enquirers at a certain stage of intellectual advance, political progress, or artistic achievement.[47]

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[44] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*.

[45] See especially Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, trans. Bruno Bosteels (London: Continuum, 2009) and Bruno Bosteels, *Badiou and Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

[46] See for instance Eduardo Cadava, Peter Connor and Jean-Luc Nancy (eds.), *Who Comes After the Subject?* (London: Routledge, 1991).

[47] See especially Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs* (Note 15, above); also *Edmund Husserl's "Origin of Geometry": an introduction*, trans. John P. Leavey (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1978) and "'Genesis and Structure' and Phenomenology," in *Writing and Dif-*

This is I think the key to resolving what would otherwise constitute an insuperable problem for any attempt to find common ground between Badiou's insistence on mathematics as ontology, i.e., as that which always potentially exceeds the compass of human epistemic grasp and Derrida's undoubted starting-point in the project of Husserlian phenomenology, no matter how deep and far-reaching his critique of its basic suppositions. It is here that both thinkers stake their claim to have moved decisively beyond the whole range of typecast dilemmas—ultimately those between subject and object, mind and world, or truth within the bounds of human cognition and truth as recognition—or verification-transcendent—that have vexed the discourse of Western philosophy since its ancient Greek origins, and all the more so in the wake of Kant's self-professed "Copernican Revolution."[48] Hence Badiou's highly qualified version of mathematical Platonism, one that unlike the classical (and inherently dilemma-prone) version makes due allowance for the truth-revealing powers of actively engaged exploratory thought. Hence also, in a different register, Derrida's meticulous analysis of the constant alternating movement in Husserl between a transcendental phenomenology premised on the existence of absolute ideal objectivities and a more historically grounded and lifeworld-oriented approach that instead takes account of the various temporal factors that can now be seen to have impinged on the process of discovery.[49] It is in this way that a better understanding of Badiou's claims with regard to mathematics, ontology and truth can help toward a better—since again less dilemma-prone—grasp of how subjectivity figures in Derrida's readings of Husserl and other thinkers.

As we have seen, Badiou offers numerous examples of the process or procedure whereby some given state of knowledge,

ference, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), 154-68, 160.

[48] On the dubious warrant for Kant's claims in this regard, see Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: an essay on the necessity of contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (London: Continuum, 2008); also Norris, *Re-Thinking the Cogito: naturalism, reason and the venture of thought* (Continuum, 2009).

[49] See entries under Note 49, above.

political situation, or stage of artistic advance—along with the ontology that underwrites it—is thrown into doubt or forced to the point of crisis and transformation through various strictly consequent though strictly unforeseeable turns in the logic of events. Indeed that phrase, "logic of events," is one that neatly encapsulates the nature of this process as Badiou describes it, since the logic (or intelligible sequence of developments) emerges fully formed only "after the event" yet with no less a sense of rigorous necessity given the new advance in knowledge, the new access to political power on the part of a hitherto oppressed group, or the new possibilities of expression opened up by some breakthrough artistic achievement. In mathematical terms—always his ultimate point of reference—it involves that quintessentially set-theoretical operation of "turning paradox into concept," or finding the resources for a radical re-thinking of some presently insoluble problem which then becomes the springboard for a full-scale conceptual revolution. Such were prototypically the advances achieved by Cantor with his grasp of the multiple orders of infinity and by Cohen with his account of "forcing" as that which made possible all such advances, itself included.[50] If one asks what relevance this might have to Derrida's (on the face of it) very different body of work then the answer has to with that jointly logical and referential dimension which, as I have argued, sets it decidedly apart from most developments in sceptically-inclined philosophy of language or critical theory over the past half-century.

Thus Derridean deconstruction, as distinct from its various spin-offs or derivatives, necessarily maintains a due respect for those axioms or precepts of classical logic (such as bivalence and excluded middle) that have to be applied right up to the limit—the point where they encounter some instance of strictly irresolvable aporia—if such reading is to muster any kind of demonstrative force. The same goes for those basic referential constraints on language that are built into its very nature as a mode of informative-communicative discourse

[50] See Notes 28, 30 and 35 above.

and which Derrida doesn't for one moment deny even though he shows how they are subject to certain complicating factors when approached with a sufficiently nuanced sense of their involvement in larger chains of contextual and logico-semantic entailment. Moreover the two considerations are closely intertwined since, as can be seen from debates on the topic from Frege down, there is simply no separating issues of reference from issues of truth, issues of truth from issues of (Fregean) sense, and these in turn from issues concerning the logical structure of the sentences, propositions, or other such larger units of discourse within which alone terms can properly be said to refer or to possess a determinate (referentially warranted) truth-value.[51] Of course that set of claims has been subject to much debate, with some—Quine among them—criticising Frege on radically holistic grounds for not having pressed right through with the contextualist argument and extended it beyond the sentence to the entire "web" or "fabric" of discourse (or currently accredited knowledge) at any given time.[52] However this contention has been challenged in turn by those, like Michael Dummett, who object that we could never get a purchase on language—never learn to use it in the first place or manifest a grasp of its working principles—unless (*contra* Quine) we had a prior grasp of its compositional structure, i.e., the dependence of language-as-a-whole on those sentential structures that define the conditions of assertoric warrant for this or that statement or truth-claim.[53] Quite simply, we should then be at a loss to understand the most basic elements of linguistic intelligibility or to figure out other people's meanings, intentions, or communicative gist on the basis of a rationally informed conjecture as to the sense (and the truth-conditions) that they are likeliest to have

[51] For further discussion see Norris, *Language, Logic and Epistemology*.

[52] See especially W.V. Quine, *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969) and "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," in *From a Logical Point of View*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1961), 20-46.

[53] Michael Dummett, *Frege and Other Philosophers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

in mind for their discourse from one sentence to the next.

What most needs stressing against the common currency of pro- and anti-Derrida commentaries alike is that Dummett's argument is fully borne out in the case of those classical deconstructive readings that constitute the heart of Derrida's project. To be sure there are passages, much cited in the secondary literature, where he does give every appearance of endorsing a wholesale contextualist position *à la* Quine. On this account it must be the aim of such readings to subvert or undermine every last appeal to the "transcendental signified," whether this be conceived in idealist terms as the ultimate reality behind sensory-phenomenal appearances or—in realist terms—as the referential point of anchorage between language and reality or word and world. However it will soon strike any attentive reader that when Derrida writes about the logic of the *pharmakon* in Plato, or supplementarity in Rousseau, or the *parergon* in Kant, or *différance* in Husserl (etc.) he is certainly out to discredit the former (idealist) conception but by no means seeking to undermine the very notions of truth and reference. Indeed, if one wanted to characterise "deconstruction" in philosophical (as distinct from literary-theoretical or cultural-critical) terms then its specific *differentia* would lie precisely in the tension—or the constant possibility of conflict—between an adherence to those "classical" values and the kinds of anomalous or discrepant evidence that may be encountered in the course of a sufficiently intelligent, sensitive, and rigorous deconstructive reading. My point, to repeat, is that Derrida shares with Badiou this desire not only to detect and locate but, so far as possible, to *analyse and formalise* whatever creates such an obstacle or challenge to existing modes of belief. More than that, it gives rise to a truth-procedure that may for some time—like Cantor's proposals—come up against strong doxastic or institutional resistance, but which thereafter acts as a periodic spur to the activity of thought by which paradox is turned into concept.

IV

I would therefore suggest that Derrida's protocols of reading, early and late, can best be understood as closely analogous to those transformative events that Badiou describes across a range of disciplines, domains or practices from mathematics to politics and which find their most rigorous formal specification in the set-theoretical procedure of forcing developed in the work of Cohen. Thus when Badiou offers his against-the-grain readings of canonical philosophers from Plato and Aristotle to Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Hegel, or Heidegger it is through a formal procedure—not merely an interpretative option—devised in order to explain how set-theoretical theorems or conjectures can be truth-tracking or sensitive to future discovery even though they exceed the utmost compass of current provability or present-best knowledge. That is to say, those thinkers can be held to have thought truer than they knew just on condition (1) that their texts are read with sufficient care, and (2) that this care is directed more toward structures of conflictual logico-semantic implication than toward whatever the author may have declared with regard to their express, conscious, programmatic, or manifest purport. For Derrida likewise, as explained in a famous passage from *Of Grammatology*, it is a matter of bringing out the often complex and contradictory relationship between that which an author knows or acknowledges concerning his/her writerly intentions and that which eludes their grasp precisely on account of its resisting or subverting any straightforward intentionalist approach.

This point is worth more detailed treatment since it has often been ignored or subject to misunderstanding among a sizeable number of Derrida's commentators. On the one hand, he declares, it is vital to take stock of an author's manifest intent since "[w]ithout this recognition and this respect, critical production would risk developing in any direction at all and authorize itself to say almost anything."[54] Nevertheless—the point of departure for a deconstructive reading—

[54] Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 158.

"this indispensable guardrail has always only *protected*, it has never *opened* a reading." To suppose otherwise would be to confine criticism or philosophy to the subaltern and wholly uncritical task of "reproducing, by the effaced and respectful doubling of commentary, the conscious, voluntary, intentional relationship that the writer institutes in his exchanges with the history to which he belongs thanks to the element of language."[55] What deconstruction seeks to reveal, conversely, is "a certain relationship, unperceived by the writer, between what he commands and what he does not command of the patterns of the language that he uses." And again—as should be emphasised in view of its distorted reception-history to date—deconstruction in the proper sense of that term, i.e., as exemplified by Derrida's classic essays must involve not only a keen awareness of these intra-linguistic complications but also a strong analytical grasp of the logical or logico-semantic structures that are thereby subject to a dislocating torsion beyond their power to contain or control. After all, this could be the case—or register as such—only on condition that the reader is able and willing to apply the most rigorous standards of logical accountability (including the axioms of classical or bivalent true/false reasoning) and thereby locate those moments of aporia or logico-semantic breakdown that signal the limits of any such reckoning.

Hence Derrida's doubtless mischievous but by no means disingenuous expression of outrage when John Searle upbraids him for thinking to deconstruct Austin's categorical distinctions—e.g., between proper and improper speech-acts, or apt and non-apt contexts, or good-faith and insincere, deceptive, or imitation speech-acts—by applying a strict bivalent logic that is simply out of place (Searle claims) in the context of everyday, ordinary, non-regimented linguistic usage.[56] The passage is worth quoting at length since it goes clean against—and helps to discredit—such a range of prejudicial ideas on the topic of Derridean deconstruction. Thus:

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[55] Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 158.

[56] Ibid., 158.

> [f]rom the moment that Searle entrusts himself to an oppositional logic, to the "distinction" of concepts by "contrast" or "opposition" (a legitimate demand that I share with him, even if I do not at all elicit the same consequences from it), I have difficulty seeing how he is nevertheless able to write [that] phrase … in which he credits me with the "assumption," "oddly enough derived from logical positivism," "that unless a distinction can be made rigorous and precise, it is not really a distinction at all."[57]

Derrida's point is not so much to cock a snook at logical positivism but rather to bring home the unwitting irony of Searle's setting up as the appointed guardian of "analytic" values and priorities while blithely recommending that they be relaxed, suspended, or held in abeyance whenever (as in the context of speech-act theory) they encounter problems or anomalous instances. Here again he agrees with Badiou that thought can make progress—whether in mathematics, the physical sciences, politics, art, or ethics—only so long as it persists in the effort to work its way *through and beyond* those dilemmas that periodically emerge in the course of enquiry and can later be seen to have supplied the stimulus to some otherwise (quite literally) unthinkable stage of advance. There is no direct equivalent in Derrida to the set-theoretical procedure of "forcing" as formalized by Cohen and extended by Badiou to fields that would normally be seen as altogether resistant to any such approach. Nevertheless, as I have said, there is a more than suggestive analogy between Badiou's meticulous working-out of that procedure in its various contexts of application through a stage-by-stage sequence of mathematically-based demonstrative reasoning and Derrida's likewise meticulous attention to those deviant or non-classical logics—of supplementarity, *différance*,

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[57] Jacques Derrida, "Afterword: toward an ethic of conversation," in Gerald Graff (ed.), *Limited Inc* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1989), 111-54, 123. For the background to this rejoinder see also Derrida, "Signature Event Context," *Glyph*, Vol. 1 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), 172-97; John R. Searle, "Reiterating the Differences," ibid, 198-208; Derrida, "Limited Inc abc," *Glyph*, Vol. 2 (1977), 75-176.

parergonality, autoimmunity, and so forth—which he finds at work in the texts of a culture that has consistently striven to conceal or efface them.

Moreover, the analogy is greatly strengthened by his telling invocations of Gödel's incompleteness-theorem at just those cardinal points—notably in his treatment of Mallarmé's paradoxical reflections on language, logic, reference, and truth—where deconstruction is most deeply engaged in exposing the extent of that same concealment.[58] In Badiou's essay of tribute to Derrida he elects to pass over the Gödelian connection and to focus instead on the link with Cantor's technique of diagonalization, that is, his proof that there exist infinite sets (like that of the real numbers) that cannot be placed in a one-for-one order of correspondence with the infinite set of integers or natural numbers, just as the power-set of any given set (the set of all its subsets) must always numerically and exponentially exceed the set itself. However that technique was taken over and put to various other mathematical and logical purposes, among them most notably Gödel's incompleteness theorem.[59] At any rate these various connections help to explain not only Badiou's (as it might seem) curious take on Derrida in the *Pocket Pantheon* piece but also the development in his thinking—some would say the outright transformation—between the two master-texts *Being and Event* and *Logics of Worlds*. After all, it is in the latter that Badiou offers his full-scale exposition of the themes that dominate his later work and which also find cryptic though eloquent expression in the tribute to Derrida. Chief among them are the ideas of *existence* (as distinct from being), *inexistence* (with its proximate source in the subtractive ontology of *Being and Event*), *degrees of existence* (these

[58] See Note 37, above; also Derrida, "The Double Session," in *Dissemination*, 173-286.

[59] Kurt Gödel, "On Formally Undecidable Propositions of *Principia Mathematica* and Related Systems," trans. B. Meltzer (New York: Basic Books, 1962); see also Ernest Nagel and James Newman, *Gödel's Theorem* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971) and S.G. Shanker (ed.), *Gödel's Theorem in Focus* (London: Routledge, 1987).

taken to vary for any given being or entity across different worlds), and the likewise differing *transcendentals* that exert their existence-bestowing effect on or in each of those worlds. "Given a multiplicity that exists in a world, there will always be an element in that multiplicity that is a non-existent in that world. A non-existent cannot be characterised in ontological terms, but only in existential terms; it is a minimal degree of existence in any determinate world."[60] To be sure, this conception has its ultimate source in the set-theoretical terms and procedures laid out in *Being and Event*. But they have now undergone a major shift of emphasis with the turn to a scalar (differential) account of the way that existence supervenes on being, or the process by which certain beings make the passage from existing only in that "minimal" degree to existing in a world that allows full scope to their diverse powers of thought, imagination, scientific inventiveness, political activism, or artistic creativity.

It is here that Badiou locates the point of convergence between his own and Derrida's work, i.e., in the latter's kindred desire to articulate those various kinds and degrees of inexistence that mark the subordinate term of any binary pair, or whatever finds itself excluded or marginalised by prevalent social, political, cultural, or conceptual structures. The greatest error, according to Derrida as Badiou reads him, is to confuse the order of being with that of existence, and—by the same token—to confuse inexistence with nothingness. This leads to the wholly mistaken presumption that there is no need to reckon with multiples (e.g. ethnic, social or political groups) that occupy a world wherein their existence is restricted to a bare minimum by a transcendental that rules against their enjoying a more active or effective mode of involvement. Thus "any multiplicity is assigned a degree of existence in the world, a degree of appearance. The fact of existing, qua appearing in a determinate world, is inevitably associated with a certain degree of appearance in that world, with an intensity of appearance, which we can also call intensity of

[60] Badiou, *Pocket Pantheon*, 130.

existence."[61] Hence Badiou's recognition of Derrida as having raised this topic to a high point of critical visibility despite doing so in a "textualist" register that he (Badiou) clearly finds less than appealing. Indeed, within the short compass of this *Pocket Pantheon* text he manages to link up the major concerns of "early" and "late" Derrida with a force of logical (as opposed to merely suggestive or associative) argument that has so far eluded most of Derrida's commentators. In particular, he brings out the marked though elusive continuity between a mode of deconstruction primarily focused on issues of textual exegesis (albeit with large epistemological and ontological implications) and a mode of deconstruction that engages more directly with real-world problems and dilemmas.

Badiou offers a way of reading Derrida that has no problem in negotiating the passage from texts like *Of Grammatology*, *Margins of Philosophy* or *Writing and Difference* to later works where his approach is for the most part conceptual-thematic and therefore, as I have said, takes the work of textual close-reading very largely for granted. Most striking here is Badiou's brief but pregnant commentary on Derrida's *Spectres of Marx*, a text that many critics have found brilliantly inventive, passionate, and ethically stirring yet oddly devoid of substantive political or theoretical content.[62] Derrida's refusal to meet those demands—to deliver some programme, formula, or theory that might be cashed out in the present—is itself a sure mark of the desire to make room for that which currently lacks any adequate means of representation, or any acknowledged right to exist (in Badiou's distinctive sense of that term) under currently prevailing cultural, political, or socio-economic conditions. Badiou's reading does much to redeem *Spectres* from the charge brought against it by left-activist detractors who deplore what they see as its merely gestural Marxist "commitment" and failure to achieve any real depth of political or philosophic thought.[63] On the other

[61] Badiou, *Pocket Pantheon*, 128.

[62] Derrida, *Spectres of Marx* (Note 2, above).

[63] See Note 7, above.

hand his reading strikes a cautionary note for those Derridean adepts overly enthused by the notion of "hauntology," that is, the idea that Marxism ought to embrace a "spectral" conception of political justice which accepts its endless deferral to a future of indefinite or unspecifiable since ontologically fugitive possibility. Although Derrida works this conception out with his usual inventive brilliance—and, be it said, with a charge of ethico-political passion undiminished by the book's highly speculative character—there is no doubt that it can easily serve, for others more impressed by the brilliance than inspired by the passion, as a pretext for the failure or refusal to engage with practical issues in the world outside the text. Thus to read Marx through Derrida, or with an eye to those aspects of Derrida's Marx so adroitly drawn out by Badiou, is to see how and why these (seemingly) opposite responses both fall short of an adequate reckoning. Let me quote the most relevant passage at length since it makes this point with the inseparable mixture of passion and precision that typifies all three thinkers.

> In Marx's analysis of bourgeois or capitalist societies, the proletariat is truly the non-existent characteristic of political multiplicities. It is "that which does not exist." That does not mean that it has no being .... The social and economic being of the proletariat is not in doubt. What is in doubt, always has been, and is now so more than ever, is its political *existence*. The proletariat is that which has been completely removed from political representation. The multiplicity that it is can be analysed but, if we take the rules of appearance in the political world, it does not appear there .... That is obviously what the *Internationale* sings: "We are nothing, let us be all." ... From the point of view of their political appearance, they are nothing. And becoming "all" presupposes a change of world, or in other words a change of transcendental. The transcendental must change if the ascription of an existence, and therefore a non-existence or the point of a multiplicity's non-appearance in a world, is to change in its turn.[64]

[64] Badiou, *Pocket Pantheon*, 130-31.

This is clearly a "creative" or revisionist reading of *Spectres* in so far as it attributes to Derrida words, phrases, concepts, ontological concerns, and certain "technical" (mainly mathematical) thought-procedures that are not to be found in Derrida's work, at least on the literal face of it. However it can fairly be said to respect what Derrida calls the "classical exigencies" of interpretation, that is, the conditions incumbent upon any reading that wishes to avoid the familiar charge—one often brought against Derrida himself although, I would argue, without adequate warrant—of treating the text in hand as merely a pretext for some ingenious display of self-willed "strong" misprision. Those conditions include (though it might surprise some of Derrida's "literary" disciples) an attitude of qualified regard for the claims of authorial intent and also—what entails that qualification—a demand that texts be read with the utmost attentiveness to their complex and sometimes contradictory structures of logical implication. Such is the requirement even, or especially, where this leads up to an aporetic juncture or moment of strictly unresolvable impasse so that the *logical* necessity arises to deploy a non-classical, i.e., a deviant, paraconsistent, non-bivalent, or (in Derrida's parlance) a "supplementary" logic.[65]

However, crucially, this is not the kind of readiness to switch or revise logics at the drop of a speculative hat that has characterised a good deal of Anglo-American "analytical" discussion in the wake of Quine's "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" and Hilary Putnam's kindred reflections.[66] Rather it is revisionism only under pressure, that is, as the upshot of a logically meticulous reading that must be undertaken if deconstruction is not to take refuge in irrationality or even—as with certain of its US literary variants—in some specially (often theologically) sanctioned realm of supra-rational ambiguity or paradox.[67]

[65] See Notes 27 and 37, above.

[66] For classic statements of the "strong" logical-revisionist case, see Willard Van Orman Quine, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," and Hilary Putnam, *Mathematics, Matter and Method* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975); also Christopher Norris, *Hilary Putnam: realism, reason and the uses of uncertainty* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002).

[67] See for instance Mark C, Taylor, *Erring: a postmodern a/theology* (Chicago:

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This is the aspect of Derrida's work that has made the greatest impression on Badiou, as witness his striking re-assessment of *Spectres of Marx*. Above all, it offers a needful corrective to the widespread idea—one that Badiou, given his antipathy toward the "linguistic turn" in its sundry manifestations, might well be expected to endorse—that Marxism "after Derrida" is a merely textual or rhetorical affair with no purchase on issues of real-world history and politics. What counts so strongly against that charge is Derrida's sheer analytic acuity, a virtue that places him more in the company of an *echt*-analytical philosopher like Russell than exponents of the language-first, conventionalist, social-constructivist, or communitarian outlook. Or again, it is Derrida's temperamental as well as intellectual affinity with a thinker like Austin who managed to combine a Wittgensteinian attentiveness to "ordinary language" with an undiminished power of analytic thought and—owing to that—a very un-Wittgensteinian precision of conceptual grasp as applied to the finest nuances of linguistic usage.[68] Thus despite his ill fame amongst analytic philosophers as the *ne plus ultra* of "textualist" (i.e., post-structuralist, postmodernist, or more broadly "continental") thinking, Derrida is much better understood as an immensely gifted close-reader of numerous philosophical texts who has also—by way of that same close-reading activity—put forward some remarkably original theses concerning the structural and historical genealogy of certain crucially load-bearing philosophical concepts. This is why Badiou can advance a speculative reading which itself goes beyond the letter of Derrida's text—beyond any "straight" interpretation—and yet finds adequate probative

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University of Chicago Press, 1984) and John D. Caputo, *Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: religion without religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997); also Arthur Bradley, "Derrida's God: a genealogy of the theological turn," *Paragraph*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (2006), 21-42. For a powerful and timely antidote to such thinking, see Martin Hägglund, *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the time of life* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008).

[68] See entries under Note 59, above.

warrant in aspects, features, or logical dimensions of that text that lack (and may even turn out to controvert) the supposed self-evidence of direct or express authorial intent.

It is therefore a reading very much in line with Badiou's repeated demonstrations, both in and outside the set-theoretical context, of the way that thought typically achieves its most radical or world-transformative advances through a process either identical with or closely analogous to the formal operation of "forcing" as defined by Cohen. The truth-procedure set to work in this particular instance of Badiou's practice as a textual analyst-commentator is the same as that brought to bear in those passages of strong-revisionist yet closely reasoned and intensely critical commentary on philosophers from Plato to Heidegger that punctuate *Being and Event*. Such, to repeat, is the process of enquiry by which certain truths can be shown to have been latent within some earlier state of knowledge and yet, at the time in question, to have exceeded any currently available means of proof, discovery, or verification. This leaves Badiou flatly opposed to the strain of logico-semantic-metaphysical anti-realism that was first introduced to analytic philosophy of mathematics, logic and language by Michael Dummett and which denies on principle the objectivist (alethic realist) claim that truth might always exceed or transcend our best intellectual or cognitive powers.[69] Indeed, it is on account of their shared resistance to this and other doctrines of epistemic, linguistic, or discursive constraint—doctrines which make truth coterminous with the scope and limits of human knowledge and/or linguistic expression—that Badiou can propose his heterodox reading of Derrida as nothing less than what Derrida's work requires if that work is to be read in keeping with its own critical practice. Or again, the great virtue of Badiou's brief yet piercing traversal of Derrida's *oeuvre* is that it brings out

[69] See especially Michael Dummett, *Truth and Other Enigmas* (London: Duckworth, 1978) and *The Logical Basis of Metaphysics* (Duckworth, 1991); also Christopher Norris, *Truth Matters: realism, anti-realism and response-dependence* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002) and Neil Tennant, *The Taming of the True* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002).

the crucial though less than obvious relationship between textual close-reading, political engagement, and a formal dimension none the less rigorous for going by way of those essential formative and motivating "conditions" that Badiou considers indispensable to any philosophical project meriting the name.

For it is just his point that the approach to these issues *via* mathematics—as the discourse of ontology *par excellence*—is uniquely revealing even when applied to thinkers who make no explicit use of it just so long *as* their thought is sufficiently disciplined to register the pressures and counter-pressures of a truth-oriented discourse capable of pointing beyond their present-best state of knowledge. That Derrida would accept this characterisation of his own work is, I think, strongly attested by the fact that he makes such careful allowance for the constant imbrication of blindness and insight—or ideology and critical acumen—in so many texts of the Western logocentric canon from Plato to Husserl. What gives Badiou's reading of Derrida a special interest is its clear demonstration of the fact—to adapt Barthes' aphorism once more—that while "a little formalism" may lead thought away from a sense of its larger historical and social responsibilities the effect of adopting a more consistent and rigorously formalised approach may well be to restore that missing dimension.[70]

[70] See Note 40, above.