

Love

Author:

Jottkandt, Sigi

Publication details:

Alain Badiou: Key Concepts

pp. 95-104

9781844652303 (ISBN)

Publication Date:

2010

License:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/au/>

Link to license to see what you are allowed to do with this resource.

Downloaded from <http://hdl.handle.net/1959.4/52743> in <https://unsworks.unsw.edu.au> on 2024-04-25

(postprint)

Love

Sigi Jöttkandt

Chapter 8, in *Alain Badiou, Key Concepts*, ed. A.J. Bartlett and Justin Clemens (London: Acumen, 2010) 95-104.

The recent interest in Alain Badiou's thought has had an additional, welcome effect of turning critical attention back to the philosophical idea of love. Love, as is well-known, constitutes one of Badiou's four "conditions" of philosophy. But with his pronouncement that "no theme requires more pure logic than love," the philosopher contradicts at one stroke the literary-historical tradition that, taking its cues from Plato, sees love as the saving *exception* to logic. For Badiou, love must be regarded in terms of an exceptional logic that simultaneously confirms the philosophical counting operation, while generating another number that is not a product of ordination. Badiou thus begins his investigations of love from a very different place than Aristophanes in the *Symposium* for whom, "Love is born into every human being; it calls back the halves of our original nature together; it tries to make one out of two and heal the wound of human nature."¹ (*Symposium* 474). For Badiou, as for Jacques Lacan, with whom the philosopher is in continuous dialogue throughout his writings on this topic, love is anything but an adhesive substance, a medieval "glue" that binds two tragically divided subjects back to a single loving unity. For Badiou, as for Lacan again, love *supplements* the count-as-One by providing the support for a universalism emptied of the object relation, which the philosopher calls the "scene of the Two."

Unlike the other truth processes (art, science, politics), love has yet to form the subject of a book-length treatment by Badiou. The philosopher's chief writings on love are his two celebrated essays, "What is Love?", published in *Conditions* (1998), and "The Scene of Two", which appeared in the collection, *De l'amour* (Flammarion, 2002). In the first of these two essays, Badiou establishes the foundational axioms or "declarations" of his philosophy of love. Rejecting the "fusional," "ablative," or "superstructural" conceptions of love that he says have characterized until now the most frequent philosophical approaches to love, Badiou asserts the following four theses:

1. There are two positions of experience
2. The two positions are absolutely disjunct
3. There is no third position

1 Plato, *Complete Works*, ed. with intro. and notes John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997) 474.

4. There is only one humanity²

Badiou's theses on love are best approached in reverse, beginning with his fourth declaration, "there is only one humanity." Badiou conceives of humanity as the "support" of the truths created in the generic procedures, - the scientific, political, artistic or amorous ways that an eruption of the incommensurable void is taken up and presented by its faithful subjects. Out of step with much of the critical doxa of the 20th century, Badiou asserts that the truths produced through these four processes are necessarily for everyone. There are universal or *transpositional* truths that are "indifferent" to the particularity of their emergence, thanks to the fact of humanity's unicity.

Nevertheless, as the third thesis asserts, despite there being only this one humanity, it does not follow that humanity therefore occupies an external, "meta" position outside or overlooking the world. There is no third position from which a sort of super-consciousness or omniscient narrator might be capable of reconciling by hidden sleight of hand the two absolutely disjunct "positions" that Badiou mentions in the second thesis. Badiou's debt to Lacan in both this and his first thesis is unmistakable, with his insistence that the two "positions of experience" are irretrievably separate.³

One might ask in what respect love fulfills the requirements of a "condition" of a philosophy, whose fundamental principle is that it produces truths universal for all? How can two inexorably separated "positions of experience" assert that the truth that love creates for them speaks to both of them - and indeed to the world - *equally*? Badiou's answer is unconventional: love is universal not because it creates a One out of the star-crossed positions of experience, but because love (and it alone among the truth conditions), creates a Two that is, as he puts it, "counted in an immanent way."

I will come back to the implications this immanently-counted Two might have for humanity towards the end, but let us first look more closely at how Badiou derives this numerical result. As stipulated, the Two of love is not the product of an addition. As he puts it in "The Scene of Two," this Two neither "counts as one," nor as "the sum of one plus one." It is, rather, the result of a *subtractive* operation, where what is subtracted from the two positions of experience is precisely that which brought them, albeit in an impossibly separated way, together. What is this factor?

In a profound engagement with Lacan's thought, Badiou states in "The Scene of Two" that the two positions of experience, to which he gives the shorthand Man (M) and Woman (W), do not compose

2 Alain Badiou, "What is Love?", trans. Justin Clemens, *Umbra 1: Badiou* (1996): 37-53.

3 In "The Scene of Two," Badiou even calls his essay a "commentary" on Lacan's claim that love supplements the failure of the sexual relation. Badiou, "La scene du deux," in *De l'amour (textes de A. Badiou, R. Dragonetti, A. Grosrichard, B. Jacques, C. Méla, J. Roubaud)* (Paris: Flammarion, 1999). English translation "The Scene of Two," trans. Barbara P. Fulks, *Lacanian Ink* 21, accessed October 19, 2009 <<http://www.lacan.com/frameXXI3.htm>>.

a whole, or a One, because what they share in common is incomplete. This incomplete element, whose debt to Lacan's object (a) is unmistakable, Badiou names the atomic object, or (u), which he describes as an "unanalyzable u of non-being that circulates in the non-relation." This u is the missed point of intersection between the two sexes; the u is the proof of the inevitability by which, like two insects creeping towards each other on opposite sides of a Mobius strip, the sexes will never 'meet', that is, will never overcome the absolute disjunction of their respective positions with regard to one another. Although Badiou does not give the reason for this absolute disjunction in the two texts we are discussing, it is direct result of the presentational operation that Badiou calls the count as One.

Briefly, the count as One is founded upon the structuring that, in presenting the void through a nominal decision, originally specifies which elements of an identity's 'set' are in a relation of belonging. The name founds the law of the situation, although Badiou is always quick to point out that, even as it purports to name the void, every evental naming is inevitably an illegal *misnaming*. In emphasizing that what passes as a complete representation or identity is only ever a semblance, an "as if," Badiou reminds us that every identity, insofar as it is tied inextricably to that original evental misnaming, can only be counted "as" One - rather than actually *being* a One.

What interests us here is the way, because of its illegal origins, the evental name is also responsible for the inalienable fact that under ordinary - that is, non-loving - conditions, every approach to the other will irretrievably be a missed approach, a non-encounter, in which the object that one aims for eludes every attempt to grasp it. This is the inevitability we saw already expressed in Badiou's second thesis regarding the two disjunct positions:

nothing in experience is the same for the positions of man and woman. Nothing. That is to say: the positions do not divide up experience, and there is no presentation affecting "woman" and "man" such that there are zones of coincidence or intersection. (What is Love?, p. 40)

Nevertheless, despite this stricture, Badiou still maintains that love mysteriously enables us to step out of presentation's logical structure of non-relation, which would otherwise dictate the entirety of our encounters with others and with the world. Love does so, uniquely of all the truth processes, by subsuming *the object beneath the subject*. The loving encounter "goes straight to that aspect of the object from which the subject draws its little bit of being," explains Badiou. It drives right at the heart of the non-relation of the sexes to enlist the disjunction as the basis for constructing the scene of the Two.

The scene of the Two comes to take the place of the count-as-One in love's "supplement" to the presentational logic that informs the other three truth processes. As mentioned, the Two arises not from an addition but through a subtraction, where the u - the point of the missed encounter - is

mutually “internally excised” from the two disjunct, sexed positions. (Note that a certain ambiguity remains regarding whether the disjunction of the sexes precedes the work of love, or if the Two is what (retroactively) causes the lack of coincidence or intersection of the sexes.) Once subtracted from the disjunct positions of experience, however, the *u* authorizes a different sort of numerical operation. It “pair[s] the two external ‘halves’ side by side through *u*, (Woman minus *u*) and (Man minus *u*),” giving rise to a Two that Badiou says is counted *immanently*. This amounts to saying that the Two is not a product of presentation’s usual logic of ordination, which ‘counts’ the subject as a One on the basis of the original misnaming of the void. The Two is rather formed from the subtraction of the remains of that original misnaming that circulates in the situation as what Badiou calls the *u*. Relieved in this way of the misunderstood object they shared in common, the Two together construct the world as a scene of inquiry through which they investigate that world from the perspective of the Two. Badiou clarifies that the scene of the Two is therefore not a presentation but “a work” and “a process.” Accordingly, the Two are not counted but instead “operate in the situation.”

At this point, it is important to note that love in Badiou’s conception is not the scene of the Two *per se*. Love, or the amorous event, is rather the “hazardous authorization” given to the “double function” of the *u*, claims Badiou. For the philosopher, love is where or how the *u* is thought together in *both* of its functions, that is to say, as the mistaken object of desire *and*, as the excess of that object, the “support” of the Two. Hence love is neither simply the first reading of the *u*, in which the two sexes misunderstand the object, the common cause of their desire. Nor is it properly speaking just the second reading, that is, the “scene of Two” created by the subtraction of the *u* from both Man and Woman. Rather, as a truth procedure, love lies in the “limping rhythm” through which the first and second readings are exercised *together*. It inhabits what Badiou describes as the “double reading,” that alternates between the contracting movement back toward the object, with its mutual misunderstanding, and an expansive movement outward through which the Two, subtracted now from the *u*, faithfully conduct their “inquiries” about the world and its “common practices.”

The condition of love in Badiou’s work is clearly intended to offer a means for extricating one from the otherwise ubiquitous logic of presentation, and is in this sense a “supplement” to that logic. Love manifests itself as a sort of intrapersonal, micro-cosmic version of the catastrophic event that, in the other truth procedures, always requires a collective act of recognition and naming. In love’s truth procedure, the name of the evental encounter is shared only by the couple in love, and yet Badiou still claims this unique, profoundly personal nomination nevertheless has validity for all. How it

succeeds at this is as follows. Badiou explains that in the back-and-forth movement from the missed encounter to the scene of the Two, “something of the scene constructed of the Two ‘sticks’ to the M and W positions in such a way that it is not exactly in the same configuration that the misunderstanding inscribes.” Something brought back from the scene of the Two inflects the missed encounter when, inevitably, the Two return from their ‘tarrying’ in the second reading, to take up their disjoint positions as sexed beings. On this latter point, Badiou is unmistakable: love is a halting movement, a limping rhythm that passes from the first reading to the second, and then again in reverse. One can say that love’s ‘work’ amounts to the difficult, hazardous (and usually failed) attempt to somehow hold these two readings together in a creative act - an almost impossible undertaking, Badiou admits, that tries to hold both ‘readings’ of the u simultaneously together.

Yet curiously, and in a manner never fully explained, as they “stick” in this way to the two positions, the results of the creative, constructive “inquiries” into the world conducted by the Two manage to re-situate the sexual non-relation in a different topological configuration than before, claims Badiou. The non-relation becomes reoriented in the representational field as a result of the Two’s creative investigations such that, as Badiou puts it, the lover becomes “*in excess of himself*, because the uncertain course [*tracé aléatoire*] of fidelity *passes through him*, transfixes his singular body and inscribes him, from within time, in an instant of eternity.”⁴ And as the object relation becomes charged and saturated with the discoveries from the scene of the Two, love’s ‘universalization’ miraculously takes place. The singular, object-directed sexual misunderstanding becomes sufficiently transformed such a ‘double reading’ of the declaration of love truly does become possible. Simply put, love’s nomination, the declaration ‘I love you,’ emerges from the scene of the Two to embrace the you of the individual lover *and* to the You of humanity at large. In this respect, the unique individual lover becomes at the same time an impersonal subject of truth that bears the ‘humanity function’ (x).

Badiou’s concept of an uncounted Two is his stunning contribution to the philosophical dilemma of unity and difference which, in “The Scene of Two”, as Badiou phrases in terms of absolute transcendence and the “Trinitarian doctrine.” Read from a Lacanian point of view, one would say that Badiou introduces the Two as a creative solution to the impasses of desire - to the fact that, insofar as the subject is a speaking subject, its relation to the world will only ever be through the fantasy. Badiou responds to the desiring impasse by proposing a space that has been purified of the object relation. He proffers the scene of the Two as a world cut loose from its tie to the name, and from the situation’s founding Law. Badiou is able to propose this “supplement” to the logic of presentation by stripping Lacan’s concept of the object (a) all the way down to its atomic form - as

4 Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward (London: Verso, 2001) 45.

the u, which may be added or subtracted in the relation between the sexes.

In essence, Badiou adapts Lacan's account of desire in proposing the u as his own interpretation of the (a). This introduces some important differences with Lacan. For one, unlike Badiou's u, Lacan's object (a) can never be 'subtracted' to form the absent support of the scene of Two. The (a) remains indelibly present throughout both the first (or 'phallic') reading *and the second reading*. This is because, once constructed in the original decision of the signifier, the object can never simply be taken away for Lacan, 'mutually internally excised' as Badiou puts it, or 'subtracted.' That is to say, the Lacanian object (a) is not a *term* that can be posited or negated, added or subtracted but, as Lacan was at pains throughout his teaching to emphasize, must be thought as an *object*.⁵

This requirement then introduces the second difference. The universality of love Badiou proposes by way of the Two is conceptually different from that which emerges from Lacan's own "supplement" to desire, and this difference boils down to Badiou's and Lacan's different approaches to language. Where Badiou proposes a universality resulting from the saturation of desire with the (non-phallic) inquiry into the world by the Two in the hazardous double-reading that makes up Badiouean love's version of the 'duck-rabbit' problem, the impossibility of ever subtracting the (a) from the Lacanian position guarantees that any universal to emerge from love still has to deal with the stubborn and indelible (a). Thus rather than subtracting the (a), as Badiou does, Lacan *divides* it. For Lacan, the (a) is present both as phallic object that circulates in the desiring fantasy *and* in the form of what Mladen Dolar suggestively calls the "object in the signifier", the jouissance or enjoyment that is attached to nomination, and indeed language, at large. For Lacan, there is an enjoyment that inheres in language which is not subject to castration. Or again, not all jouissance is phallic.

This then brings up a third difference. Lacan would certainly disagree with Badiou's insistence that love demands a pure logic. For Lacan - as for the Western literary tradition - love is illogical. It must be, because love is quite literally non-sense. It is by way of nonsense that love supplements the sexual relation and effects a formalization of jouissance through another path than phallic castration and the snares of fantasy. In *Seminar XX, Encore*, his seminar on love, Lacan declares that, 'subsisting only on the basis of the 'stops not being written' [that is, on the 'contingency' of the phallic 'writing,' desire] [love] tends to make the negation shift to the 'doesn't stop being written,' doesn't stop, won't stop.'⁶ We can unpack this as follows: for Lacan, as for Badiou, love is indeed

5 In the seminars from the mid-sixties, when Lacan was developing his conception of the object (a), he repeatedly claimed that for him, topology was not a metaphor, not a figure of speech but the Real support of his thinking. See for example his opening words in the lesson of 4 May, 1966, *Le séminaire, Livre XIII, L'objet de psychanalyse* (1965-66. Unpublished seminar.

6 Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality: The Limits of Love and Knowledge. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX*,

uncounted. However, unlike for Badiou, love depends on, or ‘subsists’ only on the basis of the formalization of *jouissance* effected by the phallic signifier. In a step that can only be briefly touched on here, it is the failure of the sexual relation itself, for Lacan, that forges the path to another means of arriving at the One. While every desiring attempt to reach the One will inevitably fail (as a result of the (a)), this does not mean there is no totality. Some form of an “all”, Lacan will hazard, emerges from the very pattern of the repeated failures.

Lacan explains this point in *Seminar XIV (1966-67), the Logic of Fantasy*, in his discussion of Russell’s catalogue of all catalogues that do not contain themselves, to which he counters the idea of a catalogue that lists all the books referred to in a single volume’s bibliography.⁷ Unlike Russell’s famous catalogue, there is no question of whether the book whose bibliography is being listed should be included (of course it should not). However, another catalogue that lists all the books that a second book’s bibliography contains, may well include the title of the first book (although, naturally, not that of the second), and so on. But by effectively grouping books into ‘sets’ in this way, Lacan demonstrates how a totality may be achieved without falling into Russell’s paradox. As Lacan explains, although each bibliographic catalogue will not include the title of the book from which it has been derived, once we put these catalogues *together into a series*, it is not unthinkable that between them, they will succeed in listing *all* of the books in the world.⁸

Although limited in advance by a structural failure that ensures that lovers will, by certain inevitability, fail to reach the desired object, if each of these unsuccessful attempts are placed together into a series, an ‘all’ is created that is more than the sum of its individual parts. This all is what Lacan names a ‘supplementary One’ (Un-en-plus), so named because it is an ‘additional signifier,’ as he puts it, ‘one that is not grasped [or, counted] in the chain.’

The final difference between the two thinkers of love can now be addressed. As a consequence of the above, for Lacan love will always concern not a Two but a One: the uncounted but necessarily

Encore, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 1999) 145.

7 Lacan, *Le seminaire, Livre XIV* (1966-67). Unpublished seminar (lesson of 23 November, 1966).

8 This can be expressed in digrammatic form, where each letter outside each set represents the title of the ‘book’ whose bibliography is being catalogued:

A (B, C, D)

B (A, C, D)

C (A, B, D)

D (A, B, C)

Between them, every ‘book’ has thus been catalogued (represented), even though there is no single catalogue that contains them all. For further discussion, see *Le seminaire, Livre XIV* (1966-67), lessons of 16 and 23 November, 1966.

written *One* that is best known to us as the crazy nonsense of lovers as they form their lips around and around their beloved's name in love. Both the (a) and the proper name, Lacan suggests in *Encore*, are means of 'writing' the absent *One*, but they do so in the utterly different ways that Lacan proposes: the (a) writes the supplementary *One* through the failure represented as the fantasies – as 'phallic' *jouissance*. The name, on the other hand, as a signifier of 'pure nonsense' constitutes a formalization that is not in the service of the signifier – a writing, as Lacan puts it in the following lesson, that 'exists already before serving the writing of the word.'⁹

To conclude, one can say that Badiou invents the concept of the uncounted *Two* for its power to turn love into as productive a truth as that of the other three conditions. For Badiou, like art, politics and science, love, too, will be a militant act of fidelity with the ability to fundamentally overturn a situation and produce a new founding name. Lacan's position, as is typical, is without such clear situationally transformative implications, although it is also not without them. Love in Lacan gives access to a universal, but the universal is always still tied to the Law (of castration), even as it supplements it.

9 Lacan, *Le séminaire XIII, L'objet de psychanalyse*. Unpublished seminar (lesson of 5 January, 1966).