LETTERS AS THE CONDITION OF CONDITIONS
FOR ALAIN BADIOU

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Abstract

This article focuses on a crucial but often underplayed aspect of Badiou's philosophy - its reliance on a doctrine of letters as the condition of truths. This article places Badiou's philosophy in relation to the work of Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, and Gilles Deleuze, suggesting how and why Badiou's work differs from theirs, and how these differences ultimately hinge on the specificities of their accounts of the status of mathematical writing. The article concludes by identifying several symptomatic lapses in Badiou's own doctrine of the letter.

Keywords


1. Preamble

This article was originally intended to comment upon “the status of poetry in the work of Alain Badiou.” Following the generic conventions of commentary, the article would have sought to contextualize, summarize and criticize Badiou’s account of poetry. I very quickly realised, however, that such an approach would be inadequate in principle — and for reasons that are specific to Badiou’s philosophy. Indeed, in the slew of commentaries that have already sprung up around Badiou’s enterprise, I have been particularly struck by three related features: 1) a focus on one “condition” of his work to the exclusion of all others (to date “Badiou and politics” seems to have been the favoured topic of discussion), as if such a restriction was polemically, practically or conceptually justifiable; 2) a concomitant, implicit, if undoubtedly disavowed, underplaying of Badiou’s insistence that all four conditions (poetry, love, politics, science) must be simultaneously available in order for philosophy itself to take place; 3) a concomitant elision of the rigorous distinction between
philosophy and its conditions, between Truth and truths, a distinction which is integral to Badiou’s philosophy and without which his work can only be misunderstood.

If such features — restriction, underplay, elision — are entirely unsurprising in secondary commentaries (indeed, they are probably essential features of commentary) they are particularly problematic in the context of Badiou’s work. After all, Badiou’s work is extraordinary in its declarative, polemical refusal of two elements undoubtedly central to most post-Kantian philosophy. For reasons that should shortly become clear, I will term these elements contempt and melangerie. Badiou’s work, by contrast, enjoins both a rejection of contempt and a rejection of melangerie. “Contempt” is a word Badiou himself has used in the context of modern philosophies’ attempts to exclude certain human practices altogether from the regime of truth. A pertinent example in the present context would be analytic philosophers’ motivated contempt for literature and what they often deem “literary philosophy” (as we shall see, the rejection of contempt does not at all preclude the pursuit of unforgiving polemics). The rejection of melangerie here designates a crucial restriction that Badiou places on philosophy: its separation and isolation from its conditions, themselves singular and irreducible to each other. The notions, popular today, of “hybridity” or of mixed identities, are repudiated by Badiou; he often notes that a key feature of contemporary conservatism is its insistence on the irremediable complexity of things: “Everyday it is explained to us that the complexity of modern societies forbids the practice of any cut. Contemporary conservatism no longer argues from the sacredness of the established order, but from its density.” (Badiou, 1990: 175)

Yet, as I’ve already stated, attempting to begin with “Badiou’s philosophy of literature” or “the political philosophy of Badiou” runs the risk of missing Badiou’s philosophy. My belief is that, however “necessary” (a word that covers a multitude of sins) the restrictions of such projects may be, they betray philosophy in the very gesture by which they believe themselves faithful to it. If such accounts may well be successful in conveying Badiou’s opinions or examining the validity of his interpretations, they do not thereby touch his philosophical project. For, as Badiou clearly states, the primary task of philosophy is the construction of a concept of “Truth,” which is the place — the only place — where the truths of poetry, science, politics and love can encounter each other. Indeed, philosophies are differentiated by the topology they offer of such a place.
The present article therefore attempts to take a different tack from that of commentary. I wish to analyse a crucial element of Badiou’s work, one which subtends all others, and which can be termed, a little provocatively, his “condition of conditions.” That element is the letter. My account will, first, reconstruct a minimal genealogy of recent decisive doctrines of the letter, with reference to the “antiphilosophy” of Jacques Lacan, the “sophistry” of Jacques Derrida, and the “philosophy” of Gilles Deleuze. I will attempt to show how Badiou’s work is liable to be misconstrued without a proper understanding of his relationship to these three figures, what he takes from them in regards to the letter, and what he contests. As we shall see, the letter in Badiou becomes at once an index of his materialism and the foundations of his Platonic ontology. Badiou’s achievement in constructing such a bizarre creature — a Platonic materialism — is integrally due to this literalism. I will also show how a misunderstanding of the role that letters play in Badiou’s work entails other symptomatic errors on the part of his commentators; indeed, entails certain errors on the part of Badiou himself. My demonstration will then proceed to an account of how Badiou’s topology of the relations between mathematics and poetry, politics and love is directed by this ontological commitment to letters, and I will offer a description of the topology of Truth as articulated by Badiou. Finally, on the basis of this description, I will return to the question of literature in Badiou’s work, to suggest various difficulties with his account.

My demonstration will not, for the most part, make arguments for or against the validity of Badiou’s doctrines; rather, I restrict myself to constructing a truncated aetiology of one crucial aspect of his work. This construction, however, fixes a point from which certain interpretations of Badiou become untenable and thereby presents a number of ways in which Badiou’s intervention demands a new understanding of some of the key issues and figures in contemporary thought. After all, Badiou has, more clearly and effectively than most other contemporary philosophers, demonstrated how all thought is founded in a necessarily groundless decision, an axiomatic, about which only dissent or adherence is possible — not argument. Yet it is only when such axiomatics are rigorously delimited that a space for genuine argument is created. Thus it is Badiou’s axiomatic of letters that will preoccupy me here.

2. Lacan, antiphilosopher

Badiou has declared that “I call contemporary philosopher whoever who has the courage to traverse, without weakening, the antiphilosophy of Lacan.”
In Badiou’s terms, an “antiphilosopher” is recognisable by three key features: 1) adumbrating a linguistic critique of philosophical categories, which destitutes philosophy’s pretensions to truth and to systematicity; 2) unveiling the ruses of domination that hid behind these philosophical pretensions; 3) appealing to an ethics which exceeds the philosophical enclosure. The antiphilosopher judges the philosopher, condemning the latter with nosological, ethical and ontological grievances and, in doing so, prosecutes a case which the philosopher must indeed answer. As I have already indicated, Lacan’s trial of the philosophers brings out very forcefully the problem of letters, and it is my contention that it is the charges Lacan lays in this regard to which much of Badiou’s work responds.

Lacan makes a crucial triple distinction that, if it shifts in the course of his work, nonetheless retains a certain consistency. The distinction is between object, signifier, and letter. This triple distinction appears very early. Very summarily, it can be correlated with Lacan’s other triple distinction, between the Imaginary, Symbolic and Real. Objects are imaginary, signifiers symbolic, and letters real. It is the third of these divisions that most interests us here. Appearing in 1957 with “The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious,” Lacan continued to develop his doctrine of the letter throughout his career. Beginning with the necessity of analysis to derail the unconscious repetitions of the letter, Lacan tends towards an account of its imbrication with subjective jouissance. As Bruce Fink puts it, “Being, in Lacan’s work, is associated with the letter — the letter, in the 1970s, being the material, nonsignifying face of the signifier, the part that has effects without signifying: jouissance effects.” (Fink, 1995: 119) Moreover, we should underline Lacan’s theoretical insistence in Seminar XI (not uncoincidentally, delivered at the ENS), of the links between Descartes, science, and “little letters.” (Lacan, 1994: 224-226) Lacan, indeed, generates what Jean-Claude Milner will later call an entire “doctrine of science” on the basis of his theory of letters.

Lacan is self-confessedly linked to a radical Cartesian problematic, in which the subject of the cogito becomes a void that supports sequences of signifiers, and for which letters insist as material things that deliver this void subject over to its singular, repetitious itinerary. If signifiers are indeed material for Lacan, they are such — not because they can be thought on the model of spatio-temporal objects of perception — but rather because they are pure differences. As such, signifiers open up the possibility of objects, both in terms of psychological development (before phonemic differences are established in the infant, it cannot distinguish objects, at least not objects in the genuinely
psychoanalytic sense of the word) and in terms of scientific history, theory and practice.

This reappraisal of the object not only — as might be expected — entails a reappraisal of the status of the subject, but also of the place of science itself. In the reappraisal of the place of science, the problematic of letters — and not just signifiers — becomes paramount. Letters, tied to the ideal of the matheme, become indices, not of knowledge, but inscriptions of the limits of knowledge. The major, imbricated headings in this debate turn out to be: letters; materiality; lack; infinity; science and truth. We shall shortly see what becomes of these categories in Badiou’s own work.

If Badiou’s project strenuously attempts to differentiate itself from psychoanalysis, psychoanalysis still proves to be an “uncircumventable horizon” for Badiou. His position in regard to psychoanalysis has three major moments:

1) psychoanalysis (emblematically, Lacanian) is a form of thought which provides indispensable resources for philosophy;
2) psychoanalysis can and should be critiqued by philosophy, in philosophical terms;
3) psychoanalysis and philosophy can find common cause in their mutual incommensurability, around the status of the matheme.

From Lacanian psychoanalysis, Badiou takes a theory of the matheme, of love, and of the subject. These, however, are submitted to immanent critique. According to Badiou, the psychoanalytic formalisation attempted by Lacan is not, strictly speaking, mathematical, logical or scientific; Lacan occupies the extreme limit of the Cartesian-Kantian dispensation, bringing the problem of the object to the fore; psychoanalysis is not a science but what Badiou calls a “generic” procedure (linked to that of love). One of the more important of Badiou’s criticisms concerns the question of the status of Lacan’s mathemes. In his “Sujet et infini,” a discussion of Lacan’s formulae of sexuation, Badiou notes that Lacan is from the first ensnarled in a peculiar contradiction. (Badiou, 1992: 287-305) Lacan explicitly links the formulae to, on the one hand, Cantor’s discovery of infinite sets and, on the other, to an intuitionist-type logic (which rejects the principle of excluded middle, and, with it, the concept of an actual infinite).
For post-Cantorian mathematics, the infinite must be rigorously distinguished from: a) the formless; b) the limitless or unlimited; c) the indefinite. The infinite is a question of number, not of form; and if, as Lacan suggests, the ego and its forms are correlated, the question of the infinite that Lacan raises is certainly not in a dialectic of the imaginary. Rather, the formulae of sexuation designate, beyond all imaginary identifications, the ways in which the symbolic (the singularity of the subject delivered through the signifier) gives onto the real (the letter marking an impasse of symbolisation). Badiou’s dispute with Lacan hinges on the status of infinity, as well as on the function that it is invoked to serve. Is infinity an inaccessible point, thought on the basis of the finite; or is infinity the ordinary state of being, to which the finite itself is the exception? According to Badiou, Lacan takes the first option; he himself takes the second. For Badiou, Lacan’s subject is still a finite subject, a lack that supports the signifying chain, and which is doubled by an object, itself the dissimulation of a lack. As we shall see, Badiou locates the lack on the side of being, not on that of the subject; his own subject is altogether purged of the slightest residues of affect and pathos; this subject is, moreover, entirely “objectless.”

In some ways, Badiou’s critique of Lacan and Miller is not substantively different from the accounts offered by writers such as Joel Dor (1996) and Arkady Plotnitsky (2000). If they focus upon different aspects of Lacan’s recourse to mathematics (the formulae of sexuation, the various schema and diagrams, the square root of \( -1 \)), there is a general agreement that the Lacanian recourse to mathematics is fundamentally analogical. As Plotnitsky puts it:

The image of this signifier, and in particular its visual image, would, then, be analogous to the geometrical, hence visualizable, representation of complex numbers, and in particular of the square root of \(-1\), of which the erectile organ becomes an analogon within the Lacanian psychoanalytic “system,” rather than being a mathematical imaginary number. (Plotnitsky, 2000: 261)

Despite these various reservations, all would agree that Lacan’s recourse to mathematical analogies enables a more adequate formulation and treatment of problems that had already arisen in psychoanalysis and philosophy, without ever previously receiving adequate resolution. So these are the first, crucial lessons that Badiou draws from the antiphilosophy of Lacan: a true materialism
insists on the materiality of the letter (and not just on that of objects or signifiers); the primacy of the lack and of “the Two” (in psychoanalysis, at least, the two sexes); mathematical formalisation is a central theoretical good. What I want to emphasize here is that Lacan’s insistence on the primacy of letters ultimately underpins both his account of the subject and his turn to the matheme, and that this is a fundamental, materialist presumption that guides his psychoanalytic theory and practice.

3. Derrida, sophist

In an essay first published in Conditions, Badiou makes three interlocking claims in the course of a definition of “sophistry.” The first of these is that there is an absolute distinction to be made between “philosophy” and “sophistry.” The sophist denies the existence of truths and the validity of the category of truth; the philosopher, on the other hand, affirms or declares the existence of truths and the validity of the category of truth (and Truth). Sophistry reduces talk of Being to a mere matter of language-games; philosophy “does not take as its point of departure words, but things.” (Badiou, 2003: 50) The second is that this distinction, though absolute, is close to indiscernible in practice: philosophy and sophistry are discursively indistinguishable, and mobilise the same concepts, names, logic, figures, etc. The third is that, despite their irreducible hostility, it is both necessary and desirable for philosophers to cohabit with sophists. There may be a fourth claim implicit here: perhaps only a philosopher would propose such a stringent distinction, and affirm its centrality to philosophical practice.

As Badiou writes:

Every philosophical process is polarized by a specific adversary, the sophist. The sophist is externally (or discursively) indiscernible from the philosopher, since his operation also combines fictions of knowledge and fictions of art. Subjectively, the two are opposed, because the sophist’s linguistic strategy aims at doing without any positive assertion concerning truths. (Badiou, 2003: 167)

If this irreducible discursive indiscernibility between philosopher and sophist can lead to philosophical confusion, it is also crucial that the
philosopher not turn such a proximity into a justification for finally doing away with sophistry altogether: “the desire to finish with the sophist once and for all impedes the seizure of truths: ‘once and for all’ inevitably means that Truth annuls the chance of truths, and that philosophy wrongfully declares itself productive of truths.” (ibid.) Such a situation entails, for Badiou, a self-annihilating disaster, whereby philosophy succumbs to dogmatic extremism.

Philosophy must, then, insist on a distance between “Truth” and “truths” — yet this distinction must not, in its turn, be hypostatised or substantivised. That is, truths are produced by philosophy’s heterogeneous conditions — art, science, politics and love — which, as heterogeneous, precisely never encounter each other in the real in which they intervene. By contrast, Truth — uppercase, singular — is the name of the void, logical, operatory place which a philosophy constructs, a place in which the heterogeneous truths of the times are verified as compossible (of which more below). Truth is not the apotheosis of presence, but its breach and frustration. The absolute value of sophistry for philosophy is that the former’s arguments are directed against the ineradicable philosophical temptation to a hypostatisation of Truth: the sophist irritates the philosopher into remembering that “the category of Truth is void.” (Badiou, 1992: 75)

Badiou has a favoured list of sophists, both “major” (Friedrich Nietzsche and “our Gorgias” Ludwig Wittgenstein) and “minor” (Richard Rorty, Gianni Vattimo), as well as a number of other figures who seem to fit rather snugly into this category: J.-F. Lyotard, for instance. Despite Badiou’s own insistence that Wittgenstein is the sophist of our era, I believe, as I have noted elsewhere (Clemens, 2001), that — by the evidence of Badiou’s own text — Jacques Derrida is probably the sophist whose work is most crucial for Badiou. Indeed, I will insist that the relation between Derrida and Badiou can only be underestimated at one’s peril — and for a number of reasons. Badiou’s own relative silence in this regard can, as we shall see, be better read as evidence for, than evidence against, such a relationship.

At a first, superficial level, I will note a significant repetition in the names of concepts. Several of Badiou’s key concepts — such as the “supplement of the event,” “undecidability” and “dissemination” — have been, often notoriously, key concepts in Derrida’s work since at least the mid-1960s. Second, there is a significant similarity in rhetoric. Here is Derrida, from De la grammatologie:
Perhaps patient meditation and painstaking investigation on and around what is still provisionally called writing, far from falling short of a science of writing or of hastily dismissing it by some obscurantist reaction, letting it rather develop its positivity as far as possible, are the wanderings of a way of thinking that is faithful and attentive to the ineluctable world of the future which proclaims itself at present, beyond the closure of knowledge.⁹ (Derrida, 1976: 4)

“Faithful and attentive thinking”: Derrida’s language is here almost indistinguishable from that of Badiou describing the “evental fidelity” of a subject who forces a knowledge of a truth into the future anterior, rupturing the existing closure of established knowledges. Third, there is a significant consonance in their mutual hostility to “presence.” Indeed, after Derrida, one cannot take the claims of unity, totality, form, and associated oppositions (gathered under the rubric of “presence”) as other than metaphysical impositions — which Derrida characteristically ruptures by appeal to the force of writing, little letters. And we have just seen how crucial this negative program is to Badiou. Where they part company is just as significant: Derrida everywhere doubts the viability of maintaining the categories of “truth” and the “subject,” fails to intervene in any serious way in the philosophy of science and mathematics, and explicitly rejects the ambition of constructing a systematic philosophy. Truth, the subject, mathematics, systematic philosophy are all central struts of Badiou’s program.

I am, in short, not only suggesting that Derrida is a sophist according to Badiou’s definition, but that he — not Wittgenstein — is the sophist, for Badiou in particular and for our times in general. After all, the abiding and pressing difficulty evinced by contemporary thinkers of all stripes in accounting for Derrida (almost forty years after his earliest significant publications) is surely one symptomatic index of his continuing troubling importance for philosophy. If the general indications that I have already provided seem to me determining, there is a further, much more specific issue of import to Badiou’s work: Derrida’s critique of Lacan’s account of the letter.

While Derrida’s work is primarily directed to the philosophical and literary canons, from the pre-Socratics to Heidegger and Celan, psychoanalysis also plays a singular and central role. Indeed, and for good reasons, the procedures of deconstruction closely resemble those of psychoanalysis itself.
There are a number of indications. Given that the detail, the lapse, the missing element or excessive protestation provide crucial material for psychoanalytic interpretation, and given that psychoanalysis consistently attempts to recompose the subjective logic that underpins apparently a-signifying, irrelevant, or incoherent presentations, the procedures of deconstruction undoubtedly resemble those of psychoanalysis. Moreover, many critics have noted something excessive about Derrida’s animosity towards Lacan in particular; if deconstruction cannot, by its own lights, simply criticise the texts upon which it relies, Derrida’s recurrent and irritable remarks about Lacan fail to meet his

own standards of deconstructive probity — a symptom if there was ever one (of which more below).

There is also Derrida’s own acknowledgement that “despite appearances, the deconstruction of logocentrism is not a psychoanalysis of philosophy.” (Derrida, 1978: 196) Derrida therefore dedicates some effort to distinguishing deconstruction from psychoanalysis, particularly around the notion of “repression.” According to Derrida, the psychological “repression” of which psychoanalysis speaks is a secondary revision of a more profound historico-metaphysical repression that only deconstruction satisfactorily unearths.

My belief is that Derrida’s fraught relationship with Lacan does not simply derive from his general indebtedness to psychoanalysis, but hinges on something that Lacan himself has analysed very well: the impossibility of mastering the letter. Yet I also believe that Derrida has accomplished something very important in this regard: Derrida’s argument is that Lacan’s problematic of the letter remains too “metaphysical,” that is, implicitly subordinate to principles that depend on the unexamined value of “presence” (or what an analytic philosopher might call “incorrigibility”). The key features that Lacan assigns to the letter include: materiality, indivisibility, localizability, a lack with delimitable borders.

In this context, Derrida has criticized what he denominates the “atomystique of the letter,” the doctrine of the indivisibility of letters. This, as he notes, in speaking of Epicurus and Lucretius, “plays a decisive role in the debate where, it seems to me, the most serious strategic stakes are being called.” (Derrida, 1996: 69) According to Derrida, the “materiality of the letter” for Lacan derives not from the putative

empirical materiality of the sensory signifier

(scripta manent), but the materiality due, on the one hand, to a certain indivisibility….and on the
other hand, to a certain locality. A locality which itself is non-empirical and non-real since it gives rise to that which is not where it is….The notions of indivisibility (protection from partition) and of locality are themselves indissociable. (Derrida, 1987: 424)

Derrida will argue that Lacan thereby retains an investment in a letter’s “proper place”: “The contour of this hole is determinable, and it magnetizes the entire itinerary of the detour which leads from hole to hole, from the hole to itself, and which therefore has a circular form.” (Derrida, 1987: 437) Derrida’s argument is that it is the pre-determination of the materiality of writing as indivisibility in its proper place that: a) reduces the true scope and status of writing; b) returns Lacan’s innovations to a suspect philosophical tradition with which Lacan himself wished to rupture.11 As Derrida will later write:

The letter, Lacan claims, shows little tolerance for partition. I have tried to demonstrate that this axiom was dogmatic and inseparable from a whole philosophy of psychoanalysis….The phenomenon of chance as well as that of literary fiction, not to mention what I call writing or the trace in general, do not so much lead up to the indivisibility but to a certain divisibility or internal difference of the so-called ultimate element (stoikheion, trait, letter, seminal mark). I prefer to call this element — which, precisely, is no longer elementary and indivisible — a mark. (Derrida, 1996: 69)

An irreducible potential for infinite divisibility is the condition of writing or marking in general, and it is this very potential that permits empirical writing without, for all that, functioning as the transcendental condition for such empirical marking. “Writing,” indeed, is invoked as that which necessarily destabilizes the distinction between empirical and transcendental. “Writing” for deconstruction therefore has the following, interconnected features: it is material without proper place or consistency, delocalised and delocalising, infinitely divisible and iterable, prior to signification, the opening of an absence without delimitable boundaries. Writing cannot be thought by traditional metaphysical concepts except as “contradiction” or “paradox” — which are themselves inadequate concepts for describing the conditions that must apply in
order for there to be such a distinction between speech and writing at all. Writing, according to Derrida, clearly functions as a name for absolute inconsistency, that is, for différance.

It is precisely this point, made again and again in different contexts by deconstruction, which has proved so difficult for contemporary philosophy to cope with. I believe that Badiou is the first major thinker to take this deconstructive argument absolutely seriously and, precisely in doing so, redirect its force in a way that enables him to return to philosophy anew. Before I explain precisely why I think this, let me invoke two other major philosophical figures who have also acknowledged deconstruction’s force in this regard: Slavoj Žižek and Jean-Luc Nancy.

Žižek, from a Lacanian perspective, has engaged himself in a long-running polemic against deconstruction and its (primarily) North American avatars, from his early texts in English to the most recent. He accuses Derrida of being Hegelian at the moment the latter seeks to criticise Hegel, of remaining Kantian, of ultimately offering commonsensical propositions rather than bracing philosophical interventions, and so forth. All of this would be entirely acceptable, if we did not also find such extraordinary comments as the following: “it is difficult to overlook the contours of the new orientation forming itself out of the crisis of deconstruction and cultural studies — names like Badiou, Agamben, up to a point Deleuze himself (an antideconstructionist, if there ever was one — the total absence of any reference to Derrida in his work is a clear signal of it), and others.” (Žižek, 2003: 503) What is so bizarre about this sideswipe is not only the apparently unmotivated and superfluous apparition of Deleuze’s supposed opinion about Derrida, but the fact that it is incorrect. In fact, Deleuze does favourably refer to Derrida, and in a text that Žižek himself cites in the very same article from which I have just quoted: “the generation to which I belong was, I think, a strong one with Foucault, Althusser, Derrida, Lyotard, Serres, Faye, Châtelet, and others.” (Deleuze, 1995: 27) I might also add that, even if Žižek had been correct, a “total absence of any reference to Derrida” is by no means a “clear signal” of being “antideconstructionist”: this is, in any case, a peculiarly dissatisfactory kind of logic for a psychoanalytically-inflected critic, given that, for psychoanalysis, absences may have a radically ambivalent significance.

In a different way, we find, in a revealing footnote to The Sense of the World, Nancy remarking that:
Concerning the “one,” it would no doubt be necessary to involve oneself in a confrontation with the “ontology of number” practiced by Alain Badiou. My mathematical incompetence makes this impossible. But it does not prevent me from recognizing certain formulations as being strictly equivalent to those to which a deconstruction of ontotheology leads....Up to a certain point, I perceive nothing other than a transcription based on a regulated change of terms. Beyond this, I am tempted to perceive in Badiou a negative theology of this “one through which the presentation of an infinity of multiples is structured.” (Nancy, 1997: 186, n. 73)

Even if one does not overlook the possible evidence of a “kettle logic” that might be discerned in this passage (e.g., I am incompetent to judge Badiou’s claims, but they are exactly the sort of thing I and others have been saying for some time, other than those propositions of his I disagree with, etc.), it also, by the same token, helps to illuminate a peculiar symptomatic torsion in Badiou’s own antipathy towards deconstruction. Nancy is, on the one hand, absolutely correct: Badiou is effecting “a transcription based on a regulated change of terms.” But Nancy is, equally, absolutely wrong: he fails to make the cut of truth that, for Badiou, divides sophistry from philosophy.

This cut has to do with the relation to science and mathematics. Derrida himself does not have a positive theory of science; rather, his critique is limited to showing how theories of science remain parasitic upon metaphysics (whatever an individual theory’s stated relationship to metaphysics may be), and those who believe themselves to be doing science (as do, say, Chomskyan linguists) are more likely to be indulging themselves in a disavowed metaphysics. So it is symptomatic that Derrida’s anticipation of the research fields opened up by his early analysis in “Freud and the Scene of Writing” are: “1. A psychopathology of everyday life…2. A history of writing….3. A becoming-literary of the literal…4. Finally…what might be called a new psychoanalytic graphology.” (Derrida, 1978: 230) The question concerning science — absolutely crucial to psychoanalysis — has, it seems, disappeared from deconstruction in a particular way. One can then see the justification of naming Derrida a sophist, for “what poetry is to the sophist, mathematics is to the philosopher.” (Badiou, 1998a: 34)

So, Badiou’s advance consists in tolerating Derrida as a sophist; “toleration” here meaning assenting to Derrida’s arguments in order not to succumb to them. On the basis of Badiou’s approach, one might even generate a
little moral homily. If one fails to come to terms with the genuine force of Derrida’s sophistry, one will end up making sophistry a symptom (ṇi ek) or a cause (Nancy). Either way, there is a failure of philosophical ethics — if both ways are, at least, better than a rejection of sophistry pure and simple.

4. Deleuze, philosopher

Badiou’s major categories of theoretical orientation are four: philosophy, antiphilosophy, sophistry and religion. Each takes a different position on the relationship of “truth” and “sense”: religion sees truth and sense as one and the same; sophistry reduces truth in the name of sense; antiphilosophy attacks the systematic pretensions of philosophy, and calls for an ethics of an extra-philosophical act. (Badiou, 2001) These orientations are, of course, not the only theoretical acts in town, but they are those whose propositions have import for philosophy itself. In order to be contemporary, a philosophy must take note of what these diverse orientations are up to; in the case of sophistry and antiphilosophy, philosophy cannot simply ignore or reject their claims. This is, as we have briefly seen, tied to a strictly philosophical form of ethics. A philosophy ought to repudiate theological motifs, tolerate sophists, and defend itself against the charges of anti-philosophers. To the extent that it cannot or does not do these things, philosophy fails itself — and falls into disaster. Or, as I have suggested, suffering sophistry as a symptom or making sophistry one’s cause are other possible ways in which philosophy can fail to live up to the revolutions of its time. (This does not, of course, necessarily mean that such failures are not of philosophical value.) It is also necessary to add that these orientations can often be found knotted together in a thinker’s work: “Nietzsche,” for instance, can be seen to weave elements of sophistry, antiphilosophy, and religion at once.

As for other contemporary philosophers? Given that, for Badiou, a genuine philosopher refuses the reduction of being to language and of truth to sense, it is presumably on the basis of this fundamental accord that philosophers wage an unforgiving and impersonal war on each other. Hence the importance of Badiou’s relation to Deleuze, and their opposition on almost every point. I have underlined the importance of the letter in Badiou, an importance completely repudiated by Deleuze and Guattari:

We’ve no use for signifiers….If our criticism of the signifier isn’t terribly clear, it’s because the signifier’s a sort of catch-all that projects
everything back onto an obsolete writing machine. The all-embracing but narrow opposition of signifier and signified is permeated by the imperialism of the Signifier that emerges with the writing-machine. Everything comes to turn on the letter. That’s the very principle of despotism overcoding. What we’re suggesting is this: it’s the sign of the great Despot (in the age of writing) that, as it withdraws, leaves in its wake a uniform expanse that can be broken down into minimal elements and ordered relations between those elements. (Deleuze, 1995: 21)

Indeed, Deleuze and Guattari are possibly the greatest examples of a contemporary philosophy that attempts to ignore the letter, an attempt that is clearly of interest given the context I have sketched in this paper. That is, this hostility to letters goes directly against one central trend in contemporary philosophy, a trend that takes in such otherwise disparate figures as Lacan, Derrida and Badiou (and perhaps this returns a modicum of sense to iek’s claim cited above, on the proviso, of course, that Deleuze is, a fortiori, totally anti-psychoanalytic). My own opinion is that such a repudiation of letters: 1) is the tributary of an inability or refusal to distinguish “signifiers” and “letters” in an adequate fashion; 2) necessarily tends towards an organicist, anarchistic mysticism. (Clemens, 2003: 133-153) So Deleuze and Guattari are of interest in this context not simply because of their indifference to letters, but because they thereby must turn to something else, to vitalism, to Bergsonian “intuition” and Stoic semiology in an attempt to retain the One by subtracting it from the actual. But it is also then no surprise that, in their resistance to letters, Deleuze and Guattari remain Romantic insofar as mathematics can be affirmatively deployed only as metaphor, and insofar as art ends up on better terms with the chaosmotic infinity than any other procedure. (Badiou, 1998a: 23-24)

It is also relevant here that, according to Badiou’s own testimony, “the notion of ‘multiplicity’ was to be at the centre of our epistolary controversy of 1992-94, with [Deleuze] maintaining that I confuse ‘multiple’ and ‘number,’ whereas I maintained that it is inconsistent to uphold, in the manner of the Stoics, the virtual Totality.” (Badiou, 2000: 4) I would add that, if “multiplicity” was at the explicit centre of this controversy, it is rather a prior axiomatic decision as to the status of letters that has already determined the positions of this controversy: letters as matter or letters as an imposition on matter? Perhaps “letters” versus “life” is the ultimate forced choice confronting contemporary
philosophical materialism in an era in which neither objects nor sacral bonds are able to provide any traction for thought in the uproar of the multiple.\textsuperscript{18}

Let us examine in more detail why this might be so.

5. The Place of Truth

As I have argued, if Badiou retains the Lacanian drive to mathematical formalisation and a conviction of the ontological primacy of letters, he also takes the Derridean critique of the delimitable lack seriously. Badiou draws the following lessons directly from Derrida’s “sophistry”: truth and being are unsustainable by thought on the basis of presence; the void opened by letters has no delimitable boundaries; the subject can no longer simply be conceived by philosophy or psychoanalysis as a localisable, delimited void. Badiou, I believe, has been convinced by the force of these arguments, which are essentially logical.\textsuperscript{19} Différance is this “event of matter” (Agamben) or “phantom of inconsistency” (Badiou) that un-founds systematicity, and this is precisely why Nancy, in the passage I quoted above, can legitimately identify Badiou as being partially in fee to the arguments of the deconstructive project. Deconstruction remains, to date, the most corrosive and rigorous program in contemporary philosophy to track the residues of metaphysical imposition, by attempting to unravel the ruses of philosophical consistency by touching on its point of unpresentable inconsistency.

On the other hand, Badiou will suggest that, if this phantom of inconsistency, of the “il y a,” cannot be rigorously defined, identified, localised, etc., it is not to the letters of literature that philosophy should turn to expose the ruses of Being, but to the letters of mathematics. As noted above, Badiou’s implication is that deconstruction — to the extent that it primarily looks to literature for a critique of metaphysics — is still caught in the romantic hermeneutic backwash. Derrida himself is certainly not a hermeneutic philosopher (indeed, a great deal of deconstructive effort has been dedicated to the displacement of hermeneutics), but the priority he accords the literary necessarily retains, despite itself, an attenuated bond to the semantic residues of natural languages.\textsuperscript{20}

Badiou, in other words, comes to the decision that the mathematical is of the order of the Real. As Badiou puts it:
All thought — therefore, mathematics — engages in decisions (intuitions) from the point of the undecidable (the non-deducible). The mathematical questions of existence only return to the intelligible consistency of what is thought... Being, thought and consistency are in mathematics the same thing. (Badiou, 1998b: 102-103)

We can add “notation” to “being, thought and consistency” here. As Brian Rotman writes: “being thought in mathematics always comes woven into and inseparable from being written. We are never presented with the pure idea of infinity as such....Thinking in mathematics is always through, by means of, in relation to the manipulation of inscriptions.” (Rotman, 1993: x) To repeat my basic contentions: for Badiou, this literality of mathematics should be understood as the production of material marks that have nothing whatsoever to do with ordinary language: mathematical symbols are not signifiers, they are letters. Mathematics and logic are formal languages in which there is no latitude whatsoever for hermeneutics. Numbers — which are marked by arbitrary letters — are not linguistic. A mathematical letter marks, not any positive entity, but the lack of objects and objectivity.

Moreover, à la Lacan, mathematical formalization marks the limits of knowledge. As Oliver Feltham glosses Badiou’s position: “the correct language for speaking of being is the formal language of set theory, but....its suitability is not attested so much by how it speaks of everything but rather by what it cannot speak of.” (Feltham, 2000: 97) It is the capacity of mathematics to rigorously delimit inconsistency — and not just be or speak inconsistency — that makes it the only discourse that “knows absolutely of what it speaks.” As such, the knowledge (ontological) that it offers is for Badiou central to philosophy. If poetry offers one form of the inscription of novelty in being — one which passes through the defiles of interpretation and natural language — mathematics marks another. For Badiou, the letters of mathematics function to mark an infinite lapsus in inconsistency.

In L’être et l’événement, Badiou poses the equation mathematics=ontology, from a philosophical, i.e., meta-ontological perspective. This enables him to rewrite the traditional terms of metaphysics into those of set theory and its axioms. Little letters or marks of mathematical writing (arbitrary in principle) mark the one of a set; each set is irreducibly multiple in its being, but “counted as one” as part of an operation of thought; all is founded on the
empty set (void), which is how mathematics thinks the in-consistency of a structure, as a multiple without concept. The inconsistent ghosts consistency by being marked as its foundation; and constantly menaces consistency through the irruption of paradoxes. The empty set or void becomes “the proper name of being” which founds a situation, “nothing” (rien) the global inconsistency of being, and the “event” a “vanishing quantity of being.”

What, however, I want to underline here is Badiou’s disjunctive coupling of the poem and the matheme. This coupling has a foundational reference (to Plato’s foundation of philosophy), a polemical reference (directed against the contemporary Romanticism of figures as otherwise opposed as Heidegger and Carnap, and which still guides, in however attenuated a form, Derrida and Deleuze), and a decisive reference (truth-seeking without reliance on established rules). Badiou, in fact, makes the interruption of the claims of poetry by mathematics one of the hallmarks of Platonic philosophy: if the “theme of ‘nature’…is decisive for ontologies of presence, or poetic ontologies,” the other route “submits the lack to the matheme, the subtraction of all presence, and thereby disjoins being from appearing, essence from existence.” (Badiou, 1988: 141 and 143)

Now, against the attacks on Plato for his expulsion of poetry from his ideal Republic, Badiou claims that this expulsion still retains a particular philosophical relation to poetry. It is indeed evident that Plato, unlike Aristotle, remains very attentive to the possibilities of poetic power. Plato’s “expulsion” of poetry, then, has nothing of contempt about it. Badiou’s own work, likewise, makes a very clear attempt to keep something of poetry at the heart of philosophy. For if mathematics = ontology for Badiou, poetry is crucial in his metaontological account of the “event.” Badiou’s “presencing” of poetic nomination is now a question of naming the disappeared event, the marking of this disappearance-without-being. Poetry therefore verges on the religious conflation of truth and sense, but not in its truly poetic form: religion, on Badiou’s terms, might be considered the presencing of the poem pushed to total well-ordering where truth and sense coincide. But there is also an issue here to do with the notion of language as naming: a true name for Badiou will have had neither sense nor reference — because it names something that has no being. It is not being — which is written mathematically — nor is it beings that are named, but the “event.” It is therefore not not-being, either, but a vanishing surplus of being. Poetry is the finite inscription of a rupturing disappearance; “trans-being” as Deleuze might say, the virtual. But, contra Deleuze, this virtual is not what connects, but what dis-connects, undoes the relations that bind and
ensure the univocity of being. Badiou, relying on a term that at once alludes to and departs from the Derridean sense, calls such a name a “supplement.” The nominal supplement of an event is integral to any and all of the truth processes, necessary to name the essential contingency of the existing situation and to open new possibilities for being. A name is always a poetic act for Badiou, much like Saul Kripke’s “primal baptism”: a creative act which divides a situation with reference to an event.24

So much for the antagonistic couple poetry and mathematics. For Badiou, there are two other conditions, love and politics, which, as it happens, seem also to be coupled in an antagonistic fashion. Love is the realm of an irreducible Two, politics of the universal and egalitarian address. Love and politics, in their antagonistic coupling, are bound up with the subjective numericity of a truth process: Love goes from 0 to 2 to infinity, by way of an effraction of the one, whereas “What singularises the political procedure is that it goes from infinity to the 1....In this sense...politics is the inverse of love. Or: love begins there where politics finishes.” (Badiou, 1998c: 166)

Thus, at the very centre of Badiou’s theory we rediscover poetry, mathematics, politics and love. This quadrature is Badiou’s properly philosophical doctrine — the place that he constructs so that all four conditions encounter each other. We can phrase this hard doctrinal kernel in a number of ways: the name of the event is poetic; the knowledge generated in the course of a process has the mathematical as its paradigm; the work of fidelity is a non-fusional, non-dialectical labour of love; the transformation of the situation for all is politics. Or: the letter as act of nomination is poetry; the letter as act of knowledge is mathematics; the letter as irreducible Two is love; the letter in its universal address is politics. I would note that this place seems fundamentally to involve the crossing of two antagonistic couples, poetry-mathematics and love-politics. Although the complexity of Badiou’s work ultimately exceeds such a reduction, I will suggest below why these couples seem to insist.25

Each condition is thereby reinscribed by philosophy in a place in which it encounters its others; it is precisely for this reason that I began by rejecting the tendency of commentary to examine “Badiou and politics,” for instance. Badiou’s interpretations and judgements on poetry, politics, science and love are not works or acts of philosophy per se, but the necessary adjuncts and accompaniments to a properly philosophical act (whatever the case, they are certainly part of the labour of philosophy). Badiou’s philosophical act is the construction of this place, the place of Truth. As we have seen, all the
conditions take letters as their material and it is therefore legitimate to claim, as I began by proposing, that letters are indeed the condition of conditions in Badiou’s work. As we have seen, all the conditions take letters as their material and it is therefore legitimate to claim, as I began by proposing, that letters are indeed the condition of conditions in Badiou’s work.

There remain, however, further considerations.

6. But what’s a letter?

Certainly, Badiou does sometimes explicitly corroborate the above point, that “letters” govern the entirety of his philosophy:

Only the letter effects but does not discern…The letter, which carries the murmur of the indiscernible, is addressed without division. Every subject is traversable by the letter, every subject is transliterable. This would be my definition of freedom in thought, an egalitarian freedom: a thought is free as soon as it is transliterated by the little letters of the matheme, the mysterious letters of the poem, the taking of things by the letter in politics, and the love letter. (Badiou, 1998a: 57)

As Peter Hallward notes, “What might be called Badiou’s epistemological optimism — his faith in the literal sufficiency of truth, and the consequent redundancy of epistemology as such — is rooted in the several forms of his appreciation of the letter.” (Hallward, 2003: 369, n. 52) Hallward is, in a sense, absolutely correct to gloss this paragraph as exemplifying Badiou’s absolute affirmation of the priority of the letter in thought. But we need to be careful with the implication that this affirmation is best considered an “epistemological optimism.” Rather, Badiou’s affirmation is linked to his theory of the the indiscernible and the Two, which necessitate the deciding and discerning — “epistemological” labour! — that is the work of those involved in a truth-process.

The letter is not an epistemological category for Badiou: it is simultaneously an integral moment in a truth process, marking its inaugural act of decision or intervention, and the matter of the knowledge of being. The disposition of letters involves a supernumerary act that at once founds the work of truth and the extension of being beyond its previous limits. Truth and being,
name and number, quality and quantity: this is the irreducible double destiny of the letter in Badiou. Being and the knowledge of being, truth and Truth, all meet in the materiality of letters. Every letter spells being, and every letter may tremble with a truth for the subjects of that truth. Which is also to say that Badiou as a philosopher has an ontological, but no epistemological faith in letters — which is why he believes there can be a history of being, but no history of truth.

Yet — unless I am mistaken — while Badiou consistently invokes letters when speaking of mathematics (to the point of running them together in such syntagms as “mathematical literalisation”), the same involvements or equations hardly ever occur in his discussions of poetry. In fact, I discern a triple symptom of letters in Badiou: 1) letters are almost always invoked in the same breath as mathematics, but do not appear so regularly when it is a question of the other three conditions (poetry, politics, love)28; 2) Badiou relies on apparently very different syntagms as if they were synonymous, e.g., “mathematical formalization,” “mathematical literalization,” “the power of literalization,” etc.; 3) an apparently arbitrary differences in the names given to the conditions: we sometimes find “mathematics,” sometimes “science,” sometimes “poetry,” sometimes “art,” etc. I would speculate that these oscillations are symptomatic, and that they derive from Badiou’s equation of mathematics and ontology. Because it is mathematical writing that bears the brunt of Badiou’s philosophy of being, he must identify letters first and foremost with the matheme; he does not invoke letters with the same regularity whenever he mentions poetry, politics or love.

Finally, the attentive reader will undoubtedly have noticed that, despite my obsessive focus on the provenance and status of letters in Badiou’s thought, I have never posed the question: what is a letter for Badiou? This question is unanswerable in anything but a metaphorical fashion. Letters are as close as one gets to the real; it is they that are disrupted by event-truth processes; they are double, at once the bearers of knowledge (mathematics) and the residues of a truth-process, indiscernible. In fact, they must be triple: letters are matter produced and transformed in the course of truths whose formalization in mathemes strips those letters of the mystery of sense. Being is literal, as we would expect from a devotee of Lucretius and Mallarmé. Yet letters, in some radical way, must be non-phenomenal for Badiou, for there is no phenomenology of appearing (although he can speak of a “logic of appearing”). Rather, as in Mallarmé’s sonnet on Poe, our ideas (“notre idée”) are the sculpting of “un bas-relief.”29 Inscriptions are not simply black on white but, as
the Mallarméan metaphor suggests, white on white, conceptual striations of the void. A bas-relief is a contouring of the void in such a way that something heterogeneous to the existing material arises, the “idea” — that is, unprecedented but rational sequences of letters. There can be, in other words, no simple opposition between “letters” and “void” in Badiou.

In one of his dominant registers, Heidegger thinks that all art is essentially poetry (and perhaps Badiou sometimes implies the same), and that language itself is poetry “in the essential sense.” Badiou perhaps maintains this too, but he is reticent on this question, due to his hostility to natural languages as the distinguishing feature of human beings. If this is not a question upon which his philosophy needs to decide, there is something more to be done here. We might suggest that, although Badiou’s account of poetry as presenting is still indebted to Heidegger’s primal words (though in a completely different sense), poetry has nothing to do with the voice for Badiou. But he does not always qualify poetry as essentially linked to writing because to do so would vitiate the specific power of literalisation he assigns to mathematics in order to rupture with the romantic philosophical suture. But this very turn to mathematics then reconnects him with precisely the romanticism with which he wishes to rupture insofar as he can no longer consider poetry to be emblematically a domain of letters. But this procedure then betrays the Mallarmé Badiou loves, the very Mallarmé who insists, before and beyond anyone else, that literature is made only and everywhere of letters.

I am not suggesting that Badiou’s philosophy stands or falls on this issue, but simply pointing to what I see as a tiny but symptomatic oscillation in his work. Yet this is also to say, just as the Romantics did of irony: in the end, no one is a master of letters.

Works Cited


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Notes

1 See, for instance (Badiou, 1994; 1992: 306-326).
2 For a good and very clear exposition of developments in Lacan’s theory of the letter, see (Chaitin, 1996).
3 See (Milner, 2000). The present essay is, by the way, the beginnings of an ongoing research project into “Psychoanalysis and Science,” conducted with Russell Grigg, who I would like to thank for commenting on an earlier draft.
5 My own opinion is that Badiou: a) ignores or reduces certain salient aspects of Lacan’s project; b) insists that a particular version of mathematics is the true “way forward” (i.e., the Cantorian infinite); c) essentially repeats Lacan’s own doctrine in regards to the subject. For another response to Badiou’s charges here, cf. (Zupančič, 2000).
6 A far more negative, even dismissive, account is provided by (Corfield, 2002). See also the other essays in this volume, including those by J.-A. Miller and Bruce Fink, as well as the (extremely odd) project of Robert Groome, (Groome, 1999; 2000).
7 Plotnitsky provides a clarifying footnote: “Here and below the term analogon may also be understood in its Greek sense, as conneting a parallel or ‘proportionate’ relation, rather than identity, of one logos (here as ‘discourse’) to another,” p. 261.
8 The relationship between “sophistry” and “antiphilosophy” is somewhat under-clarified in Badiou’s work, and indeed Badiou seems to place more emphasis upon antiphilosophy, and takes more care in his accounts of
antiphilosophy and antiphilosophers, than he does when dealing with sophistry. Nonetheless, I believe that both categories are of importance and should be handled separately.

Derrida’s French reads: “Peut-être la méditation patiente et l’enquête rigoureuse autour de ce qui s’appelle encore provisoirement l’écriture, loin de rester en deçà d’une science de l’écriture ou de la congédier hâtivement par quelque réaction obscurantiste, la laissant au contraire développer sa positivité aussi loin qu’il est possible, sont-elles l’errance d’une pensée fidèle et attentive au monde irréductiblement à venir qui s’annonce au présent, par-delà la clôture du savoir” (Derrida, 1967: 14).

Derrida’s criticisms of Lacan are scattered throughout his work; no other contemporary writer commands Derrida’s attention in so extended a way. See, for example, (Derrida, 1987, 1992 and 1998). Among those who have noted Derrida’s strange relationship to Lacan, see (Spivak, 1976), (Bloom, 1973) and (Johnson, 1980). See also the articles collected in (Muller and Richardson, 1988). Lacan’s own opinion seems to have been that Derrida was one of his — Lacan’s — own unconfessed epigones.

For example: “the motivated, never demonstrated presupposition of the materiality of the letter as indivisibility is indispensable for this restricted economy, this circulation of the proper,” (Derrida, 1987: 441).

See, for instance, almost all of iek’s books, from The Sublime Object of Ideology (iek, 1989) to Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism? Five Interventions in the (Mis)use of a Notion (iek, 2001).

Or there is this, from one of Deleuze’s collaborative works with Guattari: “Speaking like Aristotle, we would say that war is neither the condition nor the object of the war machine, but necessarily accompanies or completes it; speaking like Derrida, we would say that war is the ‘supplement’ of the war machine,” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 417).

If Derrida has always maintained that logico-mathematical writing exceeds the closures of phonocentrism he has not, as James Elkins points out, citing Brian Rotman, acknowledged “how difficult it is for those who critique logocentrism and privilege writing to justify their ongoing exclusion of mathematical symbols,” (Elkins, 1999: 135). One could certainly not level the same charges at Lacan and Badiou, who have both generated some truly magnificent mathemes.

Derrida, moreover, goes on to remark “[h]ere, Melanie Klein perhaps opens the way”(231), a statement that can only be a retreat from Lacan’s theory of the letter to a certain preconception of the object.

For a very interesting critique of Badiou (and Deleuze) from an explicitly theological perspective, see (Pickstock, 2003: esp. 36-46).
Russell Grigg has pointed out to me how the very restrictedness of Badiou’s philosophy, coupled with his polemical style, constitutes a direct challenge to his readers to either affirm or repudiate his doctrine. This aspect of Badiou reminds me, strangely enough, of the Romantic crisis-lyric, exemplified by Wordsworth’s odes. In the crisis-lyric, we are confronted by a crisis of the subject, which finds itself evacuated and split, and a crisis of the poem, which, taking itself as coming at the end of poetry, simultaneously becomes a metapoem, a poem about (the impossibility of) poetry. Such a poetry is, as Harold Bloom has consistently argued, a *gnosis* — whereby poetry continues beyond its own end, by taking another supplementary step, at once poetry in the fullness of its ambition yet with the consciousness of its modesty. This is one of the central challenges posed by Romantic poetry, and it is, perhaps, reminiscent of Badiou’s philosophy and its embattled rhetoric: I can’t go on, I’ll go on (in the words of Samuel Beckett).

If this remark has any pertinence, it would suggest that, if Badiou and Deleuze are positioned at extreme poles of the contemporary philosophical landscape, thinkers such as Derrida, Lacoue-Labarthe, Nancy and Agamben occupy a peculiar middle-ground, in which the opposition between letters and life goes undecided and, because undecided, at once permits an extension of the Benjaminian interest in the relations between “letter-power” and “bio-power” and entails a certain inability to be done with the history of metaphysics. Deleuzians seem to me particularly scathing about deconstruction precisely to the extent that deconstruction’s concern with the writing of philosophy and its willingness to direct its conclusions about such writing towards other spheres of existence (such as “life”), without ever affirming “desire” or “the virtual” per se (such concepts presumably remaining too “metaphysical”) encroaches on their philosophical terrain — without giving them any argumentative way of directly answering deconstruction’s charges (other than expressions of distaste). To this extent, Badiou is a much more acceptable interlocutor for Deleuzians, who can happily upbraid him, for instance, for his illicit restriction of ontology to mathematics. And, in this regard, I can only say that the rigour and inventiveness of set theory, which speaks of infinite infinities and unprecedented creatures such as “very large cardinals” is infinitely preferable as an ontology to the supposedly wide-ranging experiments of Deleuze. Deleuzian ontology is stuck in grandiose, quasi-lyric formulations that tend to cult-like mysticism, precisely because it presumes to be done with letters. But I will pursue these remarks elsewhere.

See also Giorgio Agamben on this point, especially (Agamben, 1999: 205-219). Incidentally, I would argue that Agamben — in an analogous fashion
to iek and Nancy — is still unable to free himself altogether from the magnetic field of deconstructive sophistry. One symptom of this, very marked in Agamben’s work, is his recourse to metaphors and parables (tales from the Hagigah, Kafka, etc.) rather than argumentative propositions whenever he turns himself to a direct critique of Derrida.

In general, Badiou levels analogous critiques against “ordinary language” philosophy, such as that tendency which stems from Wittgenstein.

Ultimately, then, Badiou’s position — despite its major departures from standard philosophical and psychoanalytic formulations — is still dependent on the terms of reference drawn from Lacanian psychoanalysis and its inheritors. Mathematical writing, for Badiou, is: non-linguistic (mathemes have neither sense nor signification); non-objective (mathemes have no object); and are material (in the peculiar sense discussed). As such, the matheme is both exemplarily rational and integrally transmissible, and it is mathematics that provides the interstitial architecture for any true knowledge of being. As Milner writes, “by mathematisation, we understand this: it is not a question of quantification (measure), but of what one could call the literal character of mathematics: that one uses symbols that one can and must take to the letter, without regard to what they eventually designate; that one uses these symbols uniquely in virtue of their own rules: we thus speak willingly of blind functioning. But this blind character, and by it alone, integral transmission is assured, which rests on the fact that anyone, informed of the rules of handling the letters, will handle them in the same manner: this is what one can call the reproducibility of demonstrations,” (Milner, 1995: 22).

Against Badiou, however, Milner thinks of mathematics as the science of beings, not being.

Feltham continues: “The peculiar virtue of set theory is that it raises the impasses which it does not resolve from the level of impotency to the level of impossibility....The impasses in set theory also concern the relation between being and presentation since they dictate what kind of sets can be presented as existing.” (Feltham, 2000: 98).

Although I must apologise for the extremely compressed nature of this paragraph, an acceptably fulsome account of Badiou’s mathematical ontology is far beyond the scope of the present article, which confines itself to examining some relevant aspects of Badiou’s theory of letters. The interested reader is directed towards the exegeses in the following texts: (Hallward, 2003: 49-106, 209-222 and 323-348), (Feltham, 2000) and (Clemens and Feltham, 2003). The first of these volumes in particular provides an appropriately extensive, clear, yet accurate overview of Badiou’s mathematical ontology.
A signification is always distributed by the language of the situation, the language of established and transmitted knowledges. A nomination, on the other hand, arises in the default of signification to fix an event, in deciding the occurrence, at the moment where this event, which supplements the situation by an incalculable chance, is at the edge of its vanishing. A nomination is a ‘poetic’ invention, a surplus signifier, that pins to language this for which nothing has prepared it,“ (Badiou, 1990: 133).

For example, “there are some similarities between politics and love, and I demonstrate this with technical concepts, numericity and the unnameable and so on; a singular connection between artistic creation and political thought also, and also a connection between love and science because love and science are the two procedures which don’t know that they are procedures, in fact. It is not the same with artistic creation. We know perfectly that it is a procedure of truth in rivalry with science. It is not the same, naturally, for the other conditions. It is necessary to elaborate a general theory of the connections of the knots between different procedures but the difficult point is to have criteria for such an evaluation,” (Badiou, 2003: 192).

The translation is taken from (Hallward, 2003: 369, n. 52).

Hallward’s acknowledgement of the centrality of letters in Badiou’s work is somewhat vitiated by the fact he does not ask further about these letters and, indeed, seems to run them together with signifiers, numbers, formalization, mathemes, etc. This is in some ways due to Badiou himself, who doesn’t consistently or clearly draw out the implications of his distinctions, for reasons we are about to remark.

For example: “La science, par exemple, est capture du vide et de l’infini par la lettre. Elle ne soucie nullement de l’infinité subjective des situations. L’art présente le sensible dans la finitude d’une oeuvre, il est exemplairement une production de finitude, et l’infini n’y intervient que pour autant que l’artiste destine l’infini au fini. La politique, en revanche, est ce qui traite, sous le principe du même, ou égalitaire, l’infini comme tel,” (Badiou, 1998c: 157); or “As such philosophy will: envisage love according to the truth alone that weaves itself upon the Two of sexuation, and upon the Two quite simply. But without the tension of pleasure/displeasure that sustains itself from the object of love. Envisage politics as truth of the infinity of collective situations, as a treatment in truth of this infinity, but without the enthusiasm and the sublimity of these situations themselves. Envisage mathematics as truth of multiple-being in and by the letter, the power of literalization, but without the intellectual beatitude of the resolved problem. Envisage finally the poem as truth of sensible presence deposited in rhythm and image, but
without the corporeal captation by this rhythm and this image,” (Badiou, 2003: 102). Examples could be multiplied.

29 The relevant lines of Mallarmé’s sonnet ‘Le Tombeau d’Edgar Poe’ run: “Si notre idée avec ne sculpte un bas-relief/Don là tombe de Poe éblouissante s’orne/Calme bloc ici-bas chu d’un désastre obscur/Que ce granit du moins montre à jamais sa borne/Aux noirs vols du Blasphème épars dans le futur.”

30 See Francois Wahl’s “Introduction” in (Badiou, 1992: 46).