

**Mallarmé in Alain Badiou's *Theory of the Subject*  
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**INTRODUCTION**

As readers of his 1988 masterwork *Being and Event* know, Alain Badiou draws on the poet Mallarmé at a decisive point in his mature philosophy: namely, the point at which he constructs his concept of the *event*.<sup>i</sup> As a particular instance of his more general doctrine of *conditions*, which demands that philosophy re-work its internal operations under the pressure of unprecedented productions in the domains of art, politics, science and love, Badiou reads *UnCoup de dés* as “the greatest theoretical text that exists on the conditions for thinking the event.”<sup>ii</sup> In a contemporaneous essay, he repeats this glowing evaluation of the poet’s operations, writing that we find in Mallarmé nothing less than a “thought-poem of the event and its undecidability.”<sup>iii</sup> Coupled with his claim that Mallarmé was engaged in a *truth procedure* that produced “the truth of post-Hugolian poetry,”<sup>iv</sup> in terms of his post-*Being and Event* work, the poet is — and unequivocally so — an heroic poet-thinker of the event who Badiou does not hesitate to name his “master,”<sup>v</sup> lauding him as an “absolutely *patient figure*”<sup>vi</sup> capable of the committed construction of a *truth*.

In this essay, however, we shall provide a detailed reading of Mallarmé’s place in Badiou’s 1982 work, *Theory of the Subject* — a work in which the poet does not figure in such unambiguously pos-

itive terms.<sup>vii</sup> Rather than an interpretative engagement with Mallarmé that seeks to submit philosophy to the truth-producing force of poetry, in *Theory of the Subject*, we witness a compelling drama of identification and distancing, of fascination and repulsion, being played out between Badiou and Mallarmé. On the one hand, Badiou will take the poet to have performed in his own time a task analogous to that of the Maoist militant faithful to May '68 — that of patiently preserving the political truth of the people in a period characterized by its denial. However, he will also construe Mallarmé as a radical conservative and idealist, whose poetic operations repress the irruptive force of revolutionary change. As an ambivalent specular double for the Maoist philosopher, Mallarmé will not be a *condition* for his philosophy. Rather, Mallarmé will incarnate a dangerous yet ever-present temptation for politically-engaged intellectuals such as Badiou — that of fatally limiting their intellectual and political radicality, despite historical circumstances necessitating a break with conservative figures of thought and practice. If Mallarmé is Badiou's "master" in *Theory of the Subject*, then it is as a "master" who marks a point that the student must, imperatively, pass beyond.

## 1. THE POET, THE INTELLECTUAL & THE POLITICAL DIVISION OF THE PEOPLE

Despite being Badiou's first systematic philosophical treatise, *Theory of the Subject* is above all a vital intervention into a specific political and intellectual conjuncture involving the fading political fortunes of the Maoist movement, born of May '68;<sup>viii</sup> the dilution or abandonment of the Marxist, structuralist and post-structuralist thought of the late-1960s and their replacement by a tepid liberalism;<sup>ix</sup> and finally the electoral victory of Mitterrand in 1981, which for Badiou represented the capturing of the revolutionary force of *les années rouges* by the mechanisms of the State.<sup>x</sup> To this situa-

tion, which is one of extreme fragility and fatigue for the revolutionary project, Badiou responds by developing a *theory of the subject*— that is, a theory of the conceptual and organisational resources required to collectively effect radical political change. There is no equivocation in this work as to what direction this change must be in for Badiou: “The serious affair, the *precise* affair, is communism.”<sup>xi</sup>

What role could Mallarmé play in such a project? We will begin by establishing the significant homology between the positions occupied by the militant philosopher and the poet, before turning to a reading of the way Badiou articulates, on the basis of this homology, his decisive difference with Mallarmé.

#### **A) MALLARMÉ AND *THE MASSES WHO MAKE HISTORY***

It is in the seminar session entitled “Deduction of the splitting”<sup>xii</sup> that we are given our first extended introduction to Mallarmé in *Theory of the Subject*. Badiou begins by reminding his audience of a distinction between two ways of thinking of “the masses” — a distinction that he will argue Mallarmé himself was perfectly aware of: “Last time I proposed to you that we split the existence of the masses according to whether they present us with the *being* of history or, as a vanishing term endowed with causal power, constituted the *making* of history.”<sup>xiii</sup> Badiou will thus offer up his own philosophical inflection of Maoist doctrine — *le peuple, le peuple seul, est la force motrice, le créateur de l'histoire universelle...*— and will have its pertinence confirmed by Mallarmé, who, as he will show, similarly split the figure of “the crowd” between its placid present existence and its revolutionary essence.

At the strictly conceptual level, the first instance of “the masses” — those who *are* history — corresponds to what Badiou calls the *splace*, the synchronic stability of the status quo.<sup>xiv</sup> Translated into recognizably structuralist terms, the *splace* is equivalent

to the *system* that individuates and structures each of its elements. As such, the difference between individual members of “the masses who *are* history” corresponds to what Badiou calls “weak difference, or the difference of position.”<sup>xv</sup> As he articulated it in the previous seminar session, multiplying synonyms for stasis: “The masses themselves, in their static being, their structural positioning, their statist placement, constitute the historical world ... These splaced masses do not *make* history so much as they *are* history.”<sup>xvi</sup>

Badiou had then proceeded to affirm that despite being the figure of “the masses” that enjoyed the most entrenched existence, these splaced “masses” were in fact *secondary* to “the disappearing fury of the *deviating* masses, that is to say, the masses who, in the unpredictable storm of their confident revolt, stood up against the figure of the State that first served as their founding principle.”<sup>xvii</sup> Invoking the vocabulary of Greek atomism, Badiou claims that all splaced masses are the result of “the *deviating* masses,” even if nothing of the force and violence — that is, of the “strong difference” — that the latter manifested can be located within the “weak differences” of the former. Such is the paradox that Badiou is underscoring: the cause of the synchronic system that supports the splaced masses is of a nature so heterogeneous to its effect that it seems to erase itself and render itself *unimaginable* from the perspective of the splaced masses.

As a result of this almost absolute heterogeneity between the collective subject as it exists during a revolt and as it endures, placidly, in the aftermath of “the mass movement,”<sup>xviii</sup> those who partake in a revolt are disoriented and find, in their splaced existence, no co-ordinates with which to orient themselves and so conceive of what they were while they *deviated*. The fact that the mass movement “appears *without a trace* on the vast stages of the historical space”<sup>xix</sup> determines that “the masses who *are* history” will require the mediation of the Maoist militant in order to preserve and finally rediscover their revolutionary essence.<sup>xx</sup>

As we will see, Badiou presents Mallarmé as playing a similar mediatory role. Indeed, at the beginning of “Deduction of the splitting,” Badiou makes the striking claim that Mallarmé had “the strong awareness” that it was within the masses who *make* history that we find “the silent secret of any art worthy of its name”.<sup>xxi</sup> Throughout this section, Badiou will systematically conflate the poet’s references to a “collective grandeur”<sup>xxii</sup> with, precisely, the capacity of the masses to *make* history. Whether or not he is guilty of forcing the semantics of Mallarmé’s *œuvre*, Badiou’s confident proclamation reveals that both philosopher and poet purport to occupy a privileged vantage point from which they can discern a virtual power within “the masses” — a power that they themselves aim to actualize, whether this be via its artistic cultivation, or via the construction of an engaged political philosophy. Crucially, “the masses” themselves are more-or-less unconscious of, or alienated from, this power. It is for this reason that Badiou refers to it as their “silent secret,” while Mallarmé describes it as the “rich muteness”<sup>xxiii</sup> of the crowd.

Despite this homology, Badiou does admit that there are certain features of Mallarmé’s *œuvre* that might prevent a Maoist militant from taking the poet seriously. And yet, despite the modish objects that clutter up his poems, all of which belong to a recognizably dated set of figures from *fin-de-siècle* Symbolism — “constellations, roses, credenzas, and tresses”<sup>xxiv</sup> — and despite the “vanishing terms” that structure his poetry being not revolutions but rather “the setting sun” or “the death of the Genius,”<sup>xxv</sup> Badiou insists that Mallarmé is a “prodigious dialectician.”<sup>xxvi</sup> In fact, he is the brilliant thinker of the “structural dialectic” such that “it will never be a waste of our time to follow [him] in the arcane secrets of [his] acidic dialectical alchemy.”<sup>xxvii</sup> In addition to playing a role analogous to that of a political leader, then, Mallarmé will provide Badiou and his seminar attendees with vital conceptual resources.

To recapitulate: the supposition is that Mallarmé could easily be mistaken for a backwards-looking bourgeois recluse; yet Badiou forcefully maintains the following, perhaps surprising, position:

Mallarmé wanted nothing less than to empower the City with a book and a theatre in which the infinite and mute capacity of the masses — which he names the crowd — would finally find what it takes to produce, by withdrawing from it, its complete emblem.<sup>xxviii</sup>

In accordance with the logic of the “vanishing term,” the masses who make history *withdraw* from their artistic “emblem,” which thereby becomes a reminder of their past being *qua* “mass movement.” The individual artist, for his part, is “the empty mediator”<sup>xxix</sup> of a communal power that infinitely surpasses them. In accordance with this reading, Badiou focuses on episodes in Mallarmé’s writings where the poet stages “the crowd” at festivals that explicitly commemorate “the foundational riot”<sup>xxx</sup>—*la prise de la Bastille* — and so celebrate their own revolutionary capacity, even if the spectators remain in a state of “self-estranged amazement.”<sup>xxxi</sup> The gaze of the poet, with which Badiou here identifies, sees in the fireworks display on the 14th of July, for instance, a representation of the collective’s power for revolution — a capacity that this collectivity itself can only obscurely sense from within their splaced existence:<sup>xxxii</sup>

Mallarmé’s key image here is fireworks: commemorating, on July 14, the foundational riot, they project onto the sky a splendour of which the crowd is only the nocturnal ground: “[...] a multitude under the night sky does not constitute the spectacle, but in front of it, suddenly, there rises the multiple and illuminating spray, in mid-air, which in a considerable emblem represents its gold, its annual wealth and the harvest of

its grains, and leads the explosions of the gaze to normal heights.”<sup>xxxiii</sup>

Given the self-estrangement of “the crowd,” the mediation of the artist — or, by analogy, the party militant — is essential. It is the illuminating power of the poem that reveals the revolutionary capacity of the French people, surrounded as they are by the parliamentary mediocrities of the Third Republic. Such is also the presupposition behind the following question that Badiou draws from Mallarmé’s description of Bastille day celebrations: “What do the seething and destructive masses of the Revolution and this peaceful flock of official spectators have in common?”<sup>xxxiv</sup> The answer is, of course, their now-dormant capacity to be “the masses who *make* history” — a capacity that it is the task of the poem to preserve and, eventually, to awaken. Unsurprisingly, then, in light of their homologous positions, Badiou understands Mallarmé’s artistic project as an activity that performs a role similar to that of the political party: to hold onto “the memory and the lesson”<sup>xxxv</sup> — and thus the promise — of an event like the French Revolution.<sup>xxxvi</sup>

This analogy is reinforced in Badiou’s reading of the prose text ‘Conflict.’<sup>xxxvii</sup> In this late work, Mallarmé, having had his bucolic reverie at his rental property in Valvins interrupted by a group of railroad workers, is overcome by ambivalent feelings that waver between a sense of guilt arising from an imagined complicity with the social order that exploits the workers, and a sense of solidarity with those he names, however ironically, his “comrades.”<sup>xxxviii</sup> This confrontation between poet and worker cannot fail to resonate with the experiences of Badiou and his Maoist comrades in the aftermath of May ’68: while the poet obviously did not go so far as to become an *établi*, he was forced to reflect on the relation his poetic practice had to the division of labour in a capitalist society. More importantly, the precise task that Mallarmé and Badiou set themselves in the wake of their encounter *qua* intellectuals with “the

other class”<sup>xxxix</sup> betrays the analogy between their positions: both must produce “the orders” and “the plan”<sup>xl</sup> that will effectively emancipate “the workers.” Mallarmé, for instance, interprets the drunken debauchery of the workers as a provisional expression of their “collective grandeur,” which will therefore have to be sublated in order to achieve its properly poetic expression. Revisiting this episode with his own concepts in hand, Badiou writes:

In the alcohol-sleepiness, this “momentary suicide,” [Mallarmé] deciphers first “the dimension of the sacred in their existence,” the provisory substitute of an interruption for the workers in which we should recognize, for lack of its higher form which would be the revolt, a derivative form of this access to the concept that is the annulment.<sup>xli</sup>

Like the spectators of the Bastille Day fireworks, these workers manifest a “self-estranged amazement,”<sup>xlii</sup> unaware that their drunkenness reveals a desire to rupture definitively with the cycle of work and rest. As Mallarmé writes:

Some instinct seeks [the dimension of the sacred in their existence] in a large number, soon to be thrown away, of little glasses; the workers are, with the absoluteness of a ritual gesture, less its officiants than its victims, if one takes into consideration the evening stupor of the tasks and if the ritual observance comes more from fate than will.<sup>xliii</sup>

Without the privileged perspective and intervention of the poet or militant philosopher, however, the workers have only their “instinct[s]” — “instinct[s]” that, while revealing their desire to break with the *splace* to which they are submitted, are nevertheless diverted from their proper course and directed towards practices that pose no threat to the established order. Similarly, the problem



for Badiou in *Theory of the Subject* is that “the potential forces, at the heart of the people, are kept at a distance from their proper concept,”<sup>xliv</sup> meaning that the militant philosopher and his comrades must set themselves the task of actualizing them.

**B) “...TWO WAYS OPEN TO OUR MENTAL RESEARCH, WHERE OUR NEED BIFURCATES...”**

Yet Badiou also draws on the poet’s *œuvre* in order to mark a line of division between appropriate and inappropriate forms of praxis in such a politically contemptible situation. Indeed, in responding to the political crisis of the Third Republic, Mallarmé expressly opposed violent political praxis as a means of emancipation. In fact, he elected to produce a poetic religion that would overcome the alienation of individual citizens and articulate a *modus vivendi* with a society that had neither God nor an absolute sovereign to provide it with a foundation.<sup>xlv</sup> Badiou takes the following famous passage from “Music and Letters” as indicative of Mallarmé’s views:

If, in the future, in France, religion comes back, it will be the amplification of the sky-instinct in each of us, rather than a reduction of our instincts to the level of politics. To vote, even for oneself, does not satisfy, as the expansion of a hymn with trumpets sounding the joy of choosing no name; nor can a riot be sufficiently tumultuous to make a character into the steaming, confounding, struggling-again-into-life hero.<sup>xlvi</sup>

Despite the fact that Mallarmé here opposes, in the name of a poetic “religion,” *both* electoralism *and* violent political praxis, Badiou retains from this passage an element that he claims “makes Mallarmé into an intellectual revolutionary”:<sup>xlvii</sup> namely, the imperative of having to “[annul] self-nomination in the crowd’s ... force.”<sup>xlviii</sup> In other words, Mallarmé articulated the necessity of dissolving the individual ego in the heroic force of the collectiv-

ity.<sup>xlix</sup> Given the collective aspect of the “religion” Mallarmé proposes, Badiou is right to say that Mallarmé expresses “a slight conceptual preference” for “the riot”:<sup>l</sup> for indeed, relative to “the riot,” the reinstatement of a deprived individualism in the act of voting, particularly within the corrupt parliamentary mechanisms of the Third Republic, is “the perfect denial”<sup>li</sup> of the collective heroism that people are capable of. Badiou can thus count on Mallarmé to reinforce his rejection of electoralism in a political context dominated by *l’union de la gauche*, which he argues has stifled the flame of May ’68.<sup>lii</sup>

However, Badiou will not follow Mallarmé in deeming a novel religion, no matter how divested of theological vestiges it might be, as the solution to the mediocre politics to which “the crowd” is presently submitted. Rather, Badiou states that “[t]here is no approximation, in our own time, of what Mallarmé dreams of, except the colossal crowds dressed in red on Tiananmen Square at the peak of the Cultural Revolution.”<sup>liii</sup> Thus, while Mallarmé had questioned whether “the riot” was an adequate expression of “the sky-instinct in each of us” — a task that only his poetic religion of the Book could perform — Badiou rebukes him and proclaims that “the riot ... is indeed the exact form of the crowd as vanishing term, which is ‘sufficiently tumultuous’ to cause the spectacular restructuring of time itself.”<sup>liv</sup> Mallarmé’s project to “empower the City with a book and a theatre in which the infinite and mute capacity of the masses”<sup>lv</sup> would be represented can thus only be provisional and finally insufficient substitute for the true expression of “the collective grandeur.”

We can delve further into this play of identification and distancing between Badiou and Mallarmé by considering the philosopher’s reflections on the poet’s well-known declaration that “there are only two ways open to mental research, where our need bifurcates — aesthetics, on the one hand, and political economy, on the other,”<sup>lvi</sup> a declaration that Badiou takes to pit art against

politics on the basis of their shared property: that of being *fictions*. As Badiou is aware, the reason Mallarmé places “aesthetics” and “political economy” side-by-side is that, as the poet puts it in *Safeguard*, “the social relation at any particular time, condensed or expanded to allow for government, is a fiction [and] belongs in the domain of Letters.”<sup>lvii</sup> In other words, the social bond is not a substance that would bind together a self-identical community — how could it be for a poet who posits the “strong difference” of the Revolution as the vanished cause of French society? Rather, it is the precarious product of a *fiction*. For this reason, the artifice of literature becomes, for Mallarmé, the sole model for understanding the functioning of collective life. In literature — and even more obviously in the theatre — a *willing suspension of disbelief* is required in order to get the fictional machine up and running. As Badiou puts it, again reinscribing a Maoist directive — namely, to *faire confiance aux masses*— “[i]n politics only one link is required: confidence, which must be granted, as in the theatre, in order for the fiction to work.”<sup>lviii</sup>

However, it is on the question of how to proceed once the insubstantiality of the social bond has been recognized that Badiou and Mallarmé part company. For his part, Mallarmé attempted to articulate a *modus vivendi* with the essential fragility of the social bond, his poetic religion taking the very artifice of this bond as a reflection of the human animal’s fundamentally fictional mode of being.<sup>lix</sup> Badiou, by contrast, seeks to overthrow the present order and produce the truly new on the basis of the insubstantiality of what is. The distinction between Mallarmé and Badiou on this point — that is, between a thought that grasps the insubstantiality of the social bond but goes no further than articulating a *modus vivendi* with it, and a thought that posits the necessity of using this insubstantiality as a spur to a transformative praxis — is, in fact, the very distinction between the “structural dialectic” and the “historical dialectic” that Badiou will go on to detail in the remainder of

*Theory of the Subject*.<sup>lx</sup> Mallarmé will thus stand as an exemplary representative of the limits of the “structural dialectic,” which locates the symptomatic where society in its apparent plenitude is undone but cannot progress beyond this recognition to an affirmative praxis of creative change. As such, Mallarmé risks being a conservative figure, however radical his recognition of “strong difference” may be.

But if Mallarmé ultimately chose the wrong course of action in his response to the political situation of his time, there remain sufficient commonalities between the poet and the Maoist philosopher to make Badiou’s recourse to the former worthwhile. To clarify this point one final time, let us now compare two passages: one that details how Badiou conceives of the poet’s praxis; and another that treats the appropriate actions of a Maoist militant.

Drawing his initial set of remarks on the poet to a close, Badiou proclaims:

What is especially marvellous is that in these colonial and provisorily docile times, Mallarmé should have been able to detect, if only so as to assign its task to art, that everything that has splendour, everything that subsists and continues, results from the crowd’s lack and bears witness to the fact that, by disappearing, the rioting masses have founded even the world that forbids them to exist.<sup>lxi</sup>

Art may therefore be a poor substitute for revolution, but it does preserve its promise, the artist pinpointing within the present the traces of the vanished event. As for the Maoist militant, the artist’s task seems to substantially match one that they themselves must perform:

It is one of Mao’s strengths to have insisted that the revolutionary Marxist is the lookout [*guetteur*] for the

vanishing term, emblem of the new within the old. He or she is the active guardian of the future of the cause.<sup>lxii</sup>

Both Badiou and Mallarmé, then, are *guetteurs*. The artist remains, however, either memorialist or prophet, whereas the militant engages in a creative political praxis that takes its orientation — as well as one of its forms — from “the foundational riot.” The figure of Mallarmé thus allows Badiou to reinforce his own position and mark the appropriate lines of division between appropriate and inappropriate forms of praxis on the part of *l’intellectuel*.

### C) THE STRUCTURAL DIALECTIC

This line of division runs, at the properly conceptual level, between “the structural dialectic” and “the historical dialectic.” As an intellectual occupying a liminal position between the positive and negative poles of the forms of praxis in which such a figure can engage, Badiou presents Mallarmé as a radical thinker of the “structural dialectic” who took this form of thought to the limit-point at which it topples over into the “historical dialectic.” In the preceding discussion, we saw that Mallarmé posited “strong difference” at the basis of the illusory stability of the status quo. However, he aimed to shore up this latent instability by producing a poetic religion that positivized the nothingness of the social bond. For Badiou, on the other hand, the point is precisely to exacerbate this latent instability in order to effect revolutionary change. Indeed, Badiou will argue that Mallarmé demonstrated but also disavowed, in the very movement of his poetry itself, the primacy of the Maoist “historical dialectic” — a “dialectic” that aims to think, precisely, revolutionary ruptures.

As a prelude to this demonstration, Badiou unfolds what he takes Mallarmé’s poetic programme to be:

Mallarmé thus sets out his programme: “To evoke, with intentional vagueness, the mute object, using allusive words, never direct” ... The object, reduced to silence, does not enter the poem, even though its evocation grounds the poetic consistency. It is the absent cause. But the effect of its lack lies in affecting each written term, forced to be “allusive,” “never direct,” in such a way as to become equal on the Whole to the silence by which the object was only initially affected.<sup>lxiii</sup>

For Badiou, what makes a poem by Mallarmé into a synthetic Whole is the fact that all of its elements work together to evoke an absent object. Like the *splace* that delegates the place of its elements, this object is the “absent cause”<sup>lxiv</sup> of the poem. Since each element of a *splace* can be said to be both itself and its capacity for linkage with other elements from the same *splace*, the words of the poem are “split,”<sup>lxv</sup> being at once themselves and the part they play in evoking the absent object.

Finally, Mallarmé adds a dialectical twist to this program: if it is silence that is ultimately to be evoked — the silence of the absent object — then “we must also efface the instrument of the effacement,”<sup>lxvi</sup> namely, the words themselves. It is this last twist that Badiou names “the lack of lack,” a second-order lack that he will attempt to show occurs systematically in Mallarmé’s poetry and which he will name “annulment.”<sup>lxvii</sup> Mallarmé thus adds an innovative move to the “structural dialectic”: as Badiou had indeed promised his materialist audience, “it will never be a waste of our time to follow [this hero] of nonbeing into the arcane secrets of [his] acidic dialectical alchemy”. However, as we will see, it will also be the task of the materialist reader to detect the ruses of this irredeemably idealist poet, whose “never-abandoned respect for the real” is matched only by “[his] disavowal”<sup>lxviii</sup> of its force.

## 2. THE POETRY OF THE STRUCTURAL DIALECTIC

Having established the structural proximity between Badiou and Mallarmé, both of whom believe that, in their respective times, “the potential forces at the heart of the people, are kept at a distance from their proper concept,”<sup>lxi</sup> and both of whom set out to actualize these forces, we can turn to the way Badiou effectively reads Mallarmé as a poet of the “structural dialectic”. It is the proximity of their positions and tasks that allows Badiou to articulate with precision his decisive difference with respect not only to Mallarmé, but also to all those petit-bourgeois intellectuals who perpetually risk becoming “hermetic recluse[s]”<sup>lxx</sup> and traitors to the Communist cause, their inherent conservatism leading them to believe, like Mallarmé, that “there is no temporal advent of the new.”<sup>lxxi</sup> As he has already done with Hegel during the first year of his seminars, Badiou will now discern “ruptures and inconsistencies that constitute ... a veritable symptomatology of the struggle of tendencies”<sup>lxxii</sup> between structural and historical forms of thought in Mallarmé’s poetry. We will begin by following his reading of the sonnet *A la nue accablante tu*, before turning to his engagement with *Ses purs ongles*, the quintessential Mallarmé poem.

### A) A LA NUE ACCABLANTE TU

Badiou begins his reading of the sonnet *A la nue accablante tu*<sup>lxxiii</sup> by making the following provocative remark: “Mallarmé’s poetic machine, though opaque when looked at from the outside, nevertheless possesses only a single meaning.”<sup>lxxiv</sup> For this reason, Badiou objects to those who, superficially celebrating the apparent polysemy of Mallarmé’s poem, are in fact doing nothing more than renouncing the hard labour required to discern its logic.<sup>lxxv</sup> Whatever the value of this claim, the key point that the philosopher-turned-anti-hermeneut is making is that the univocal meaning of

the poem depends upon the operation within it of the “structural dialectic.”

After offering a pedagogically-apt presentation of the syntactical development of the poem, Badiou turns firstly to translating its central figures into the concepts of the “structural dialectic.”<sup>lxxvi</sup> Thus, “l’abîme,” in which sea and sky are indistinguishable, is interpreted as a “figural representative” or a [m]etaphor of the *splace*,<sup>lxxvii</sup> no doubt because of the homogeneity that sea and sky, blended into “the low-ceilinged oppressiveness of the nothing,”<sup>lxxviii</sup> share with the unicity of the *splace*, which is also a figure of the One. To this first metaphorical link Badiou adds a second link, this time between the sea-sky abyss and “the white page” upon which the poet writes. This second metaphor is perhaps the more successful of the two, since the *gestalt* suggested by the sea-sky abyss does indeed evoke a blank page. The “sea and sky” *qua splace*, however, is a less successful suggestion, since the *splace* necessarily entails a structure, of which the abyss and the white page have, precisely, none.

In addition to this sea-sky abyss, the poem presents “a trace, the foam, [which] holds the principle of a meaning,”<sup>lxxix</sup> Upon the blank page, then, the poet has placed a thin thread of ink; and in the crushing homogeneity of the *splace*, the mark of something heterogeneous has appeared. Badiou suggests that what we witness here is Mallarmé staging the “strong difference”<sup>lxxx</sup> between “the mark,” a distinctive trait, and “the void,” which names the necessary *spacing* between distinct marks and which is “the condition *a priori*”<sup>lxxxii</sup> of distinctivity and thus of the “weak differences” that inhere between individual marks. As opposed, then, to being a mere structuralist for whom the “penchant consists in seeking to combine elements that are identical,” or to reduce everything to “weak difference”<sup>lxxxii</sup> in a gesture of philosophical conservatism, Mallarmé is far more radical since he posits from the outset “an absolutely qualitative difference” between a distinctive trace —



“l’écume” — and the non-intuitive process of *spacing*— “l’abîme,” the void — that is the *a priori* condition of “weak difference.”<sup>lxxxiii</sup>

Badiou then claims that the poem is about the *interrogation* of the meaning of this mark, this minimal difference: “On the Mallarméan sea, split off from nature, reduced to its anonymity, a trace, the foam, holds the principle of a meaning (*tu le sais, écume*: ‘you know this, foam’) which it does not give up (*mais y baves*: ‘but slobber on’).”<sup>lxxxiv</sup> There are two hypotheses as to the *cause*— the *meaning*— of the foam: it is either the trace of a sunken ship or of a siren’s dive.<sup>lxxxv</sup> The foam itself marks the eventual irruption of “strong difference” that breaks with the homogeneity of the *splace* — an event of which it is the single, fragile trace. Badiou in fact relates the fragility, as well as the obvious absence of the event itself, to Mallarmé’s conservatism, as if the poet were here purposefully presenting a metaphysics according to which an eventual rupture with the stasis of the *splace* would be so fragile in its being that it would immediately disappear, the synchronic stability of the *splace* reasserting itself: “The place is so avaricious as to take back immediately whatever it gives out, the thin scar of the cause.”<sup>lxxxvi</sup>

Next, Badiou remarks that “[t]hese two hypotheses are in turn organized according to two metonymic chains”:<sup>lxxxvii</sup> that is, the shipwreck and the siren are evoked by reference to their *parts*, rather than to themselves *quawholes*. Specifically, the “ship is made up of a distress signal (the horn), then of a mast stripped of its sail; the siren, of its young flank, and then of its trailing hair.”<sup>lxxxviii</sup> In terms of the “structural dialectic” these metonymies correspond to “the chain effect”<sup>lxxxix</sup> since they are the individuated elements of a system that totalizes them — the system here being either the ship or the siren *qua* “absent causes”. The poetic logic behind evoking these objects in such a manner is that, insofar as they are lacking, Mallarmé has reinforced their lack by referring only to their most fragile, insubstantial attributes, rather than to the ship or siren in their plenitude.<sup>xc</sup>

Having demonstrated this link between semantics and metonymy, Badiou announces that “we find ourselves back with all [the] categories” of the “structural dialectic” that are operative in the poem:

The strong difference (foam/blank), which opens up the problem of the thing; the network of weak differences, organized in metonymies (ship, mast, horn; siren, hair); the transition from one to the other by way of causality of lack, supported by the vanishing terms: the ship’s wreck and the siren’s drowning, of which what is — the foam — is the mark out-of-place on the splace’s desolation.<sup>xci</sup>

To this compact set of propositions Badiou adds the claim that the two “vanishing terms,” the shipwreck and the siren, are semantically and conceptually consistent with “l’abîme” *qua* void and hence with the “strong difference” that is in play in an event: the shipwreck, for instance, is of essence engulfed by “l’abîme,” and the siren is a marine creature who inhabits the void as its element. A conceptual necessity is thus being actively inscribed in the various figures chosen by the poet.<sup>xcii</sup>

Finally, Badiou turns to the stage of the “structural dialectic” at which the “deduction of the splitting” occurs.<sup>xciii</sup> In the case of *A la nue accablante tu*, this “splitting” is evinced by “l’écume,” which is at once a part of the sea-sky abyss *qua splace*— and thus “captured in the network of mundane differences”<sup>xciv</sup>—and a trace of the vanished event, its “absent cause.” Surprisingly, Badiou does not locate this “splitting” in the metonymies of the shipwreck and the siren, even though this would follow the logic of the “structural dialectic.” In fact, Badiou is equivocating on the meaning of the concept of the “absent cause”: by referring to “l’écume” as “split,” he is working with the interpretation of the “absent cause” *qua* event, whereas to refer to the parts of the ship or siren as “split” would

suppose that the “absent cause” implied its properly structuralist meaning. In any case, on his reading “[l’écume] indicates the negative power and the underlying effect of abolition”<sup>xcv</sup> and is thus the precise poetic equivalent of “the trace left behind in the social world by the great mass movements” that the Maoist *guetteur* is meant to preserve as well as deploy in order to orient their political praxis.

Badiou thus concludes that the poem is “the emblem of the structural dialectic,”<sup>xcvi</sup> its internal logic integrally geared toward staging its operations. However, the poem does appear to break at a decisive moment with this logic:

Why two vanishing terms (ship and siren)? Why this second cleavage which, cut in two by the enigmatic coup de force of “or,” *ou cela que*, arranges two metonymical chains?<sup>xcvii</sup>

If “the structural dialectic” *qua* the logic of “structural causality” requires only *one* “absent cause” to function — if, that is, the structuration of a set of distinctive marks is integrally determined by their belonging to a single system *qua* their “absent cause”; or if the masses who *are* history are the effect of the vanished masses who *make* history — why does Mallarmé nevertheless stage *two*?

In posing this question, Badiou seems to be submitting his reading to the actual logic in play within the poem, thereby treating it as an autonomous artefact that could potentially take him in a different direction than his pedagogical — not to mention political — procedure requires. However, this apparent *passivity* on the part of the philosopher obscures the fact that Badiou will go on, now and in the following seminar session, to postulate a predictable isomorphism between the two consecutive vanishing terms of the poem — the shipwreck and the siren — and the two stages in the passage to Communism that French Maoism posits. As Badiou

states, “[y]ou see, in Maoism, we must also produce the destruction of the bourgeoisie *twice*.”<sup>xcviii</sup> Drawing for the first time on the fact that the poem clearly gives vastly different semantic values to the two vanishing terms, Badiou asks: “One or two vanishing terms? Is the ‘revolution’ that Lenin opposes to the State the same as that of the Cultural Revolution?”<sup>xcix</sup> Thus, an easily recognizable two-part movement is in play here that Badiou renders isomorphic to the two vanishing terms in the poem — a two-part movement that, schematically, is nothing other than the passage from the “dictatorship of the proletariat” to Communism as such.<sup>c</sup>

The current “Marxist politics” that will carry this out — after, that is, the catastrophic destiny of “the socialist State and the party at its helm,” which Badiou believes to be nothing less than a “a rat’s nest of bourgeois bureaucrats”<sup>ci</sup> — is, of course, Maoism. In terms of the “structural dialectic” at work in the poem, the transition to a Maoist politics thus corresponds to “annulment” of the state-based figures of Marxism.

Thus, while Badiou does permit the poem to unfold itself autonomously, allowing it go beyond the mere figuration of the “absent cause,” he quite brutally stamps the intra-poetic progression from shipwreck to siren with the mark of the Maoist doctrine according to which a *second* revolutionary rupture is required in order to break with the inertia of the socialist State.

This criticism aside, Badiou skilfully discerns the fact that the poem seems to apply *to itself* the logic of the “absent cause” that it first stages, metaphorically, with the shipwreck. In other words, it will make the first vanishing term *vanish*: “The poem exhibits the causality of lack in its effect, but also in its law.”<sup>cii</sup> From this point, Badiou is able to make another leap to an analogy with Marxism: given the self-reflexively performative nature of the text — that is, the fact that “[w]hat the poem says, it does”<sup>ciii</sup> — it can be said to distantly resemble the performative nature of Marxist tracts, which aim to bring into existence the reality that they describe.

Again mixing the lexicons of politics and aesthetics, Badiou states: “Mallarmé interprets the structural dialectic less as the theme for a metaphor than as a directive for the poem.”<sup>civ</sup>

Drawing this seminar session to a close, Badiou persists with his provocative interweaving of the Mallarméan and Marxist texts, proffering a set of affirmations that follow the Maoist line but which, on this occasion, mark a decisive difference with the poet:

From that which put an end to the old tyrannies, we must also know how to liberate ourselves. Those who, after that, persist in talking about socialism and its State as a stable entity certainly share with Mallarmé the hypothesis of a halting point. But they have failed to see its annulment.<sup>cv</sup>

Here, the poet is clearly aligned with those who persist in believing that the contemporary incarnations of socialism, in particular the PCUS and its French outpost, the PCF, carry the revolutionary flame. There can be no progression beyond these institutions — no novel Maoist politics, for instance — since they effectively constitute “a halting point” for history. As Badiou will demonstrate in the following seminar session, Mallarmé too posits “a halting point” in his intra-poetic dialectic. However, his very own operation of “annulment” contradicts that of the “halting point,” thereby producing a tension that is operative in the very *form* of his poetry itself and which, as we will see, is the mark of the conflict between his ideological conservatism and the latent — though disavowed — radicality of his poetic procedures. Badiou will explore this conflict in depth in the following seminar session.

## **B) “...THE INTERPOLATED DRAMA OF THE SUBJECT...”**

When Badiou returns to *A la nue accablante tu*, he begins by clarifying what the operation of “annulment” consists in. As he states,

“annulment” constitutes a rupture — a “leap”<sup>cvi</sup>— in the internal economy of the poem: in other words, it breaks the metonymical chains” that had been constituted by the initial hypothesis of the sinking ship (the stripped and abolished mast, the ineffectual horn). By proposing a second hypothesis, the operation of “annulment” institutes a second and mutually exclusive totalization that is radically heterogeneous to the first:

Here the annulment of the vanishing, the shift to a second line of totalization, requires that instead of the metonymy of a supplementary effacement ... there comes — “or else...” — the qualitative break in which the strong difference, dismissed before, takes its revenge so that the repressed heterogeneity returns.<sup>cvi</sup>

In breaking with the first line of totalization, which had instituted a series of “weak differences” between the various parts of the shipwreck, there necessarily occurs a brief return of “strong difference,” which Badiou quite strikingly describes as having been “dismissed” or “repressed beneath the homogeneity of the initial “absent cause.” Again, the correlate of this conceptual distinction is the figure of Mallarmé as a radical idealist, whose intellectual honesty led him to posit the existence of “strong difference,” even if he finally opted for the stability of structure and repressed the moment of “heterogeneity.” Indeed, Badiou would have us believe that the very punctuality of this “caesura” is part of a conscious strategy on Mallarmé’s part:

Oh, but Mallarmé would much rather not show this subject that the structural will of his dialectic stumbles up against! If only all this could be kept within the homogeneity of the poetic operations!<sup>cvi</sup>

This last passage follows the statement that, according to Badiou, “Mao discerned the current agency of the communist political sub-

ject, the stroke of force that separates it from its alleged prior line of existence”. Thus Mao would discern a political and philosophical necessity in such a “caesura,” whereas Mallarmé, while equally astute — and hence, from another perspective, equally supportive of Badiou’s position — “would much rather not show” the unavoidable return of “strong difference”. Instead, Mallarmé would prefer that the “drama [be] resolved in an instant, just the time of showing its defeat, which unfolds in a flash.”<sup>cix</sup> For this unrepentant idealist, the reluctant admission of the necessity of “strong difference” must be as swift, indeed as invisible, as possible. Reinforcing this position, Badiou states on another occasion that Mallarmé has contracted a “debt” for having “broken the pact of the metonymical chains,”<sup>cx</sup> which is to say that he has *betrayed* the logic of “the structural dialectic” by inserting a second “vanishing term” into the poem, thereby momentarily breaking with his supposed commitment to idealist thought.

To cover over the “the emergence of force,”<sup>cx</sup> Mallarmé contains it within a few terms — “ou cela que,” “excepté que” — in order to return as quickly as possible to “the monotonous and infinite effectivity of the grinding of being under the law of an absence.”<sup>cxii</sup> As the above passages show, Badiou deals with Mallarmé as if he were at once a glorious ancestor and a respected opponent, an idealist who is nevertheless “an intellectual revolutionary”<sup>cxiii</sup> and whose work the materialist reader must closely scrutinize in order to find the points where his “harsh sincerity”<sup>cxiv</sup> and his fidelity to an “implacable rigour”<sup>cxv</sup> led him towards the edge of “the structural dialectic,” thereby offering us a glimpse of the Maoist “historical dialectic.”

And indeed, as he had done in the previous seminar session, Badiou again posits a homology between the poem’s internal logic and Maoist dogma: “Mao has posited for the first time that there is no hope in engendering communism in a linear fashion from the socialist State.”<sup>cxvi</sup> On Badiou’s reading, the logic of such a break is

already inscribed at the innovative point at which the Mallarméan poem steps beyond the “structural dialectic” in its deployment of the operation of “annulment.”

There are, however, a number of difficulties with this homology. The first, which has less to do with the homology itself than with Badiou’s very procedure, is that the Maoist directives repeated here are perfectly indifferent to the logic of the poem itself. Indeed, they must be, since they belong to the unquestioned axioms that *Theory of the Subject* is built on and which constitute the very fabric of the consensus that joins Badiou and his Maoist comrades together. Within these constraints, Mallarmé’s poetry can either reproduce this doctrine or contradict it in a way that allows Badiou to reinforce it.

Secondly, the homology itself is problematic, since *A la nue accablante tu* stages *one* possible event with two hypotheses as to its provenance, rather than *two* events spaced out temporally, as per the passage from the installation of the Socialist State to the Cultural Revolution.

Thirdly, while Badiou recognizes that the two hypotheses are not symmetrical, this being the whole point of the conceptual distinction between “vanishing” and “annulment,” he does not sufficiently take into account the semantics of the two hypotheses. It is not for nothing, for example, that the first hypothesis refers us to a tragic human drama and the second to the mere splashings of an imaginary marine creature. Such a passage from metaphysical heights to playful pantomime sits uneasily with the forward march of Maoism. Badiou thus strategically strips back the semantics to retain only the structural operations of the poem.

However, in the final stage of his reading of *A la nue accablante tu*, in which he will reveal the conflict between the operation of “annulment” and Mallarmé’s positing of a “halting point” in his poetry, Badiou does draw on the semantics of some of the poet’s key figures.



### C) “NO HALTING POINT”

At the beginning of the third section of this seminar session, Badiou poses an almost violently incongruous question: “Why does the poem come to a close?”<sup>cxvii</sup> He continues:

it would be logical for it to remain open-ended, since the combined operations of the vanishing and annulment, by which the cause produces its effect and then delivers its concept, by themselves imply no halting point whatsoever.<sup>cxviii</sup>

As Badiou puts it further on, Mallarmé cannot be called a Hegelian, since his dialectical operations of “vanishing” and “annulment” do not have the perfect circularity of Hegel’s idealist dialectic, which returns to a simple term. According to Badiou — who is here provocatively ignoring the fact that the poem is a *sonnet*— the only way his poems can bring about closure is by recourse to traditional figures such as the siren or the constellation, with which “Hugo already end[ed] plenty of poems”<sup>cxix</sup> and which Badiou suggests are “signifiers [that] are in some way separable”<sup>cxx</sup> from the internal logic of the poem, governed as it is exclusively by “vanishing terms” and “annulments”. Indeed, it would be perfectly conceivable for the procession of “vanishing terms” and their “annulment” to continue indefinitely: “The ship... or else the siren... if not Neptune... unless a conch...”<sup>cxxi</sup> Such an infinitely open progression would, Badiou suggests, be equivalent to the following Maoist directive: “Periodize and pass beyond. No halting point. ‘Success, failure, new success, new failure, and thus all the way to the final victory.’ But the ‘final’ in question is only the one prescribed by the periodization.”<sup>cxxii</sup> But in contrast to Maoism, and in conflict with the latent logic of his sonnet, Mallarmé’s idealism leads him to produce a vision of “an

implacable finitude.”<sup>cxiii</sup> To achieve this, Mallarmé must “injec[t] some familiar connotations therein in order to achieve this his goal”<sup>cxiv</sup> into the closing moments of his poems, which thereby offer an artificial impression of circularity:

Because the floating language we inherit authorizes us to do so, we tolerate that a poem pauses at the rose of dark night or the swan’s exile. We have almost arrived safe and sound, having been guided by the star.<sup>cxv</sup>

Thus, despite his relative inattentiveness to the semantic values of Mallarmé’s key tropes, Badiou draws on them here at this strategic moment in order to advance his vision of the poet as a conservative idealist. On Badiou’s reading, Mallarmé is misleading us into thinking that the finitude of the “structural dialectic” is an absolute horizon for thought and practice. It is therefore up to the Maoist philosopher to call the poet’s idealist “bluff”<sup>cxvi</sup> and to deduce from Mallarmé’s failed effort to contain the radicality of his poetic procedures the necessity of passing beyond to the “historical dialectic.”

What can we conclude from Badiou’s reading of *A la nue accablante tu*? It is perhaps most pertinent to point out that Badiou makes two incompatible critiques of Mallarmé’s idealist tendencies in this sonnet. Firstly, he accuses Mallarmé of dissimulating the irruption of “strong difference” in his poems. He then accuses him of having artificially ended his poems, whose operations of “vanishing” and “annulment” by themselves imply no stopping point. But are these accusations the same? That is, are they both relevant to the idea that Mallarmé attempted to disavow the primacy of “strong difference,” the key operator of the “historical dialectic”? Arguably not, since the possibility of an endless cycle of “vanishings” and of “annulments” does not offer anything more than “the regular and virtually infinite iteration of that which vanishes and that which is annulled”. Such an eternal iteration would not help us exit “structural dialectic”. But why be concerned for the artificial

“halting points” of his poems if the two above-mentioned operations are irreducibly tied to the “structural dialectic”?

Furthermore, there is no doubt a real violence in Badiou’s question as to why *A la nue accablante tu* ends, especially insofar as it imputes to Mallarmé a kind of perverse motivation to put a stop to the progress of his dialectic. While in the case of a philosopher like Hegel it might be plausible to argue, for instance, that he is “capable of locally forgetting his global forgetting”<sup>cxxvii</sup> of certain materialist postulates, and that his idealism is not systematic but rather sustained by “arbitrary local decrees,”<sup>cxxviii</sup> a poem, on the other hand, is not submitted to a *conceptual* logic. Nevertheless, it is precisely this conflicted conflict between the idealist and the materialist tendencies within Mallarmé’s poetry that gives Badiou’s reading its intelligibility. Most importantly, it allows Badiou to say, at the end of this seminar session, that “the poem attests that we must dialecticize the structural dialectic beyond itself”<sup>cxxix</sup> — in other words, that the very limitations of Mallarmé’s poetry point toward the “historical dialectic” and thus reinforce, albeit in a negative fashion, the primacy of Badiou’s own position. Furthermore, the subjective correlate of this intra-poetic drama — namely, the figure of the petit-bourgeois poet himself, split between being “an intellectual revolutionary”<sup>cxxxx</sup> and a “hermetic recluse”<sup>cxxxi</sup> — is a point of ambivalent identification for Badiou and, no doubt, for much of his audience. This conclusion will be reinforced in the following section, where we turn to Badiou’s reading of *Ses purs ongles*.

#### **D) *SES PURS ONGLES***

In the final stage of his reading of Mallarmé in *Theory of the Subject*, Badiou turns to the arch-Mallarméan poem, *Ses purs ongles*.<sup>cxxxii</sup> In his reading, Badiou will be particularly drawn to the poem's presentation of a deserted salon after nightfall, suffused as it is with the anxiety that follows the passing of daylight. Unlike other examples of *le drame solaire* in Mallarmé's *œuvre*, *Ses purs ongles* stages a singular scenario in which almost all traces of the setting sun have disappeared, thereby reinforcing the anxiety inspired by the thought that the vanished event — the sun itself — is forever lost.<sup>cxxxiii</sup> In this poem, even the "rêve[s] vespéra[ux]" of the event, themselves already situated at one remove from it as a reality, have been "brûlé[s] par le Phénix" that metaphorizes the sunset. As Badiou states, in this poem the "burden of lack ... is at a maximum."<sup>cxxxiv</sup> Gardner Davies, whose reading of the sonnet is Badiou's principal point of reference, describes the sonnet as follows:

If the allusion to the Phoenix suggests that it is here again a question of the solar drama, this sonnet, unlike the preceding ones, does not offer us a direct evocation of the sunset. The sonnet is as if situated at the second stage of the drama, the task of perpetuating the light of the vanished sun being entrusted to the genius of the poet ... In the obscurity, Anxiety maintains the memory of the vanished light and of all that it had inspired in the poet.<sup>cxxxv</sup>

For Badiou, the scenario of *Ses purs ongles* resonates powerfully with the fading political fortunes of Maoism in the aftermath of May '68 – a situation from which all the traces of that event seemed to have vanished. However, in identifying with what Davies takes to be the task of "the genius of the poet" — namely, to "perpetuat[e] the light of the vanished sun" — Badiou, along with his Maoist comrades, can transform this anxiety into an index of their fidelity

to the event of May '68: "For a militant Marxist, there is the anxiety of the night of imperialist societies, the anxiety of the ashy Phoenix of May '68, or of the Cultural Revolution ... It is also a duty to divide what is obscure, to hold fast to the worker's promise even at the heart of its deepest denial."<sup>cxxxvi</sup> Their anxiety is thus the mark of their duty to preserve — just as the poet had preserved "the memory of the vanished light" — the promise that the eventual rupture of May '68 represented, even in adverse conditions. The massivity of the night is "divide[d]"<sup>cxxxvii</sup> by their praxis into, on the one hand, the inertia of the status quo, and on the other hand, the fragile traces that flicker with the promise of the event. However, *Ses purs ongles* offers a vision of the extreme precariousness of this very promise, its affective power thereby matching the experience of the Maoist militants, who can again identify with the poet's privileged role as *guetteur* in the maintenance of the solar promise.

Badiou also believes that, at the properly *conceptual* level, *Ses purs ongles* both stages the two operations of the "structural dialectic" that we are already familiar with — "vanishing" and "annulment" — and presents a novel operation, "foreclosure," which is evinced, precisely, by the absent amphora, Master and ptyx. The specificity of these objects lies in the fact that, despite appearing to be like "vanishing terms" that could function as traces of the vanished sun — the amphora, for example, which Davies simply equates with the ptyx, could have held the ashes of the Phoenix, figure of the sun<sup>cxxxviii</sup> — they can neither play this role nor be subject to the operation of "annulment," *because they are not present in the room*. As Badiou has it,

The amphora, the master, and the ptyx have all the attributes of the vanishing term, except the vanishing, from which a trace of the lack should be evinced. They lack without a trace. On this account, they are un-substitutable.<sup>cxxxix</sup>

In locating this novel operation, Badiou appears committed to allowing the poem unfold its various modalities of absence autonomously, without undue interference from the philosopher. But it will now be his task to show what significance “foreclosure” has for the “structural dialectic.” The final line of the above passage gives us an indication: insofar as they are “unsubstitutable” these terms are, according to Badiou, the point of departure from which all deduction — substitution — proceeds. As Badiou states, “[t]his is something you will never be able to deduce: this triangle of the subject [the master], death [the amphora], and language [the *ptyx qua* pure signifier].”<sup>cxl</sup> The terms that are “foreclosed” in the sonnet strictly denote those surd-like foundations to rationality from which all thought and action proceeds. However, the pertinence of the operation of “foreclosure” is not made particularly evident by Badiou, who makes a characteristic leap to a remark made by Mao which apparently contradicts the idea according to which there is, in fact, something unconceptualizable: “Mao did not seem to believe so. He said: ‘We will come to know everything that we did not know before.’”<sup>cxli</sup> Despite this doctrinal statement by Mao, Badiou suggests that “the Marxist axiom: ‘It is right to revolt,’ is ambiguous. Is it meant to indicate that the revolt has its reason, its concept?”<sup>cxlii</sup> As Badiou tells us, if this were indeed the case then there would be nothing unconceptualizable and a rational foundation to revolt could be posited. Badiou, however, rejects this, and his statement that the “revolt is what founds rationality, and it concentrates a thousand reasons to revolt,” is aligned with the presence of the foreclosed terms in Mallarmé’s poetry.

What is to be made of this novel operation of “foreclosure”? Badiou does not develop the significance of the notion of the unconceptualizable, except to use it as a bridge to a brief discussion of Maoist doctrine — a discussion whose terms are in fact indifferent to the sonnet, and which serves more to reinforce the foundational assumptions of the seminar than to consider a genuinely novel

proposal. Arguably, then, the central though implicit role that the absent amphora, Master and ptyx, play in Badiou's reading of *Ses purs ongles*, is in fact to reinforce the radical fragility of the solar promise that the poem stages. As Gardner Davies has it, "the absence of the amphora, the absence of the Master himself, seem to remove all elements that would be able to capture the dreams of light, which Anxiety continues to maintain in the obscurity of the empty salon."<sup>cxliii</sup>

And so, just as the poet had for his duty the guardianship of the solar promise, the sonnet also offers, in the figure of the "lamp-bearer" with which the poet identifies, a precise image of the subjective stance that they are to take:

We are lamp-bearers. Just as the poem does with the deserted salon, we inspect the political place in order to discern therein the staking out of antagonism that will relay the promise and organize the future.<sup>cxliv</sup>

Indeed, after "the burden of lack"<sup>cxlv</sup> with which the quatrains are invested, the poem will, finally, offer a fragile mark of this promise in the tercets:

If the obscurity of the room seems once again to triumph over the dreams of light, let us not forget that in a torch relay the lamp-bearers always passed the torch on to the next lamp-bearer. Likewise, here, when the elements of light are threatened with extinction, the decor itself furnishes a symbol to replace them.<sup>cxlvi</sup>

The first symbol of the vanished sun, which is announced by an instance of what Badiou had called "signifiers of the exception"<sup>cxlvii</sup> — namely, in this case, the "Mais..." that opens the tercets — is the possible glint of dying sunlight at the edge of the mirror: "Mais proche la croisée au nord vacante, un or/Agonise selon peut-être le

décor.” This, then, is the first intra-situational trace of the vanished event that *Ses purs ongles* offers the lamp-bearer-poet, which is therefore equivalent to “l’écume” of *A la nue accablante tu*. And the first “vanishing term” that could be its “absent cause” is the nix that — perhaps — has been drowned in the dark pool of the mirror after being pursued by “[d]es licornes”: “Des licornes ruant du feu contre une nixe/Elle, défunte nue en le miroir...” Finally, in apparent symmetry with the logical progression of *A la nue accablante tu*, the nix *qua* “vanishing term” is then followed by the operation of “annulment,” which is here performed by the upsurge, within the frame of the mirror, of the constellation of “la Grande Ourse,” another possible cause of the brief twinkling in the frame of the mirror.

From this short sketch of Badiou’s reading, we can point to two individual instances where *Ses purs ongles* does not precisely match the operations of *A la nue accablante tu*. The first arises from the fact that the nix *qua* “cause absente” is definitively revoked by the actual presence of the constellation, which figures, in the depths of the sonnet’s night, as the promise of the vanished event. In *A la nue accablante tu*, however, no certainty remained – at least on Badiou’s reading — as to what the “absent cause” of “l’écume” in fact was. To this problem is added the philosopher’s curious remark concerning the myth of the nymph Callisto, who died and became the constellation of “la Grande Ourse.”<sup>cxlviii</sup> What this intertextual link shows, according to Badiou, is that the “annulling connection” between the nix and the constellation “is all the more firm and affirmative.”<sup>cxlix</sup> However, as he had described them in his reading of *A la nue accablante tu*, there is no necessary *semantic* connection between the operator of “vanishing” and that of “annulment,” and it is not clear why Badiou would need to introduce one now.

The second instance of asymmetry involves the fact that there are *three* “vanishing terms” in this poem: in addition to the nix and the constellation (and this latter is not, strictly speaking, a



“vanishing term,” since it is actually present in the setting of the poem), Badiou rightly remarks that the sun is the initial “vanishing term”. But if the sun is “the absent cause” of the scenario of the poem, then it is unclear whether the nix in fact plays the role of the hypothetical cause of the glinting of sunlight in the mirror’s edge. And can the sun in fact be a “vanishing term” if we are certain of its reality, and if it is something that returns cyclically? In *A la nue accablante tu*, by contrast, both “vanishing terms” were hypothetical. Badiou nevertheless does treat the sun according to the logic of the “vanishing term,” since he claims that the constellation effects its “annulment”: “By way of the star, the sun certainly comes to be lacking twice. The star presupposes the night, hence the causal vanishing of the sun, and yet, by bringing brightness, it annuls it.”<sup>cl</sup>

On Badiou’s reading, then, *Ses purs ongles* instantiates the operations of “vanishing” and “annulment,” in however complex a form, and adds a third operation, “foreclosure,” to Mallarmé’s intra-poetic “structural dialectic.” We have attempted to show, however, that his attempt to match these operations with the internal dynamics of the poem is less successful than in the case of *A la nue accablante tu*. What gives Badiou’s reading its coherence and resonance, then, is the paradigmatic scenario that *Ses purs ongles* stages and the task that it gives the poet — a scenario and a task with which Badiou and his Maoist comrades can, at the price of a metaphorization of their predicament, identify with.

#### E) “... A PRECIOUS LEGACY”

Badiou adds a final twist to his reading that returns to the negative image of Mallarmé as an intellectual conservative, purposefully repressing the immanent heterogeneity of “strong difference” that is both presupposed and disavowed by his idealist “structural dialectic.” Indeed, Badiou argues that *Ses purs ongles* is a particularly successful example of Mallarmé’s strategy of disavowal. For while in

*A la nue accablante tu* the re-emergence of “repressed heterogeneity” occurred in the break between the quatrains and the tercets and was marked by the signifiers “ou cela que,” Badiou argues that in this poem we find only “a subject of diminished force, almost folded back — finally! — onto the even surface of the metonymical operations.”<sup>cli</sup> Apparently, this “subject” is nothing other than the upsurge of the constellation at the poem’s close, which marks the promise of the event and so of the “strong difference” it encapsulated. It is therefore as if the poet, motivated by a perverse will to dissimulate the necessary moment of “strong difference,” has engineered an ingenious way of having this moment go unnoticed.

What, then, does this strategy of Mallarmé’s consist in? As we know, the apparent narrative arc of the poem coincides with a search for the traces of the vanished event, the setting sun. It ends, finally, with the reflection of the constellation in the mirror, which confirms the promise of the event in the anxious depths of the night. However, the ruse of the poet consists in making us suppose that the discovery of the eventual trace is the result of the creative praxis of the lamp-bearer figure with which the utopian poet and Maoist militant both identify. Instead, the stars are there from the start:

The solution to the lamp-bearing problem (here, the reflection of the Great Bear) must be there from the start. Only the poet’s dead eye spins the subtle threads that link one object to another so that, in a tricked perspective, the illusion of a surprise may come about.<sup>clii</sup>

The temporal progression from anxiety to salvation is nothing more than the imaginary trajectory of a subject stumbling upon signs that have already been laid out for them; nothing new happens in Mallarmé’s poetry, only the shuffling between an already-fixed set of possibilities. The narrative arc of struggle followed by success is brutally undercut by the structural fact that the condi-

tions for this success were always-already in place, set up like a trap by an idealist poet committed to demonstrating that there is “no temporal advent of the new.”<sup>cliii</sup>

For Mallarmé, in short, there is no history. His poetry is integrally geared towards repressing the necessary moment of “strong difference” that produces revolutionary breaks. He can only offer the Maoist militant a “precious legacy,” whose very limitations attest to the necessity of passing beyond to the “historical dialectic.” By contrast, Badiou tells us that he is “not swayed by an order of things in which all thought is devoted to the inspection of that which subordinates it to the placement of an absence and which brings salvation for the subject only in the already-thereness of a star.”<sup>cliv</sup> Badiou must thus bid farewell to his Symbolist “master.” His prescient poetic thinking of the “structural dialectic” has been traversed, and the ruses of his ineradicable conservatism have been avoided. We will have to wait until *Being and Event*, or, just prior to it, the essay “Is it Exact That All Thought Emits a Throw of Dice?,” for Badiou to find in Mallarmé the precise resources he requires for thinking, rather than repressing, the *event*.

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<sup>i</sup> Alain Badiou, *Being and Event* (London: Continuum, 2005) 191–198.

<sup>ii</sup> Alain Badiou, “Est-il exact que toute pensée émet un coup de dés?,” *Les conférences du Perroquet*, no. 5 (janvier 1986) 10–11.

<sup>iii</sup> Alain Badiou, ‘Mallarmé’s Method’, in *Conditions* (London: Continuum, 2008) 298. Translation modified.

<sup>iv</sup> Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, *op. cit.*, 404.

<sup>v</sup> Alain Badiou, *Logics of Worlds. Being and Event 2* (London: Continuum, 2008) 4. Translation modified.

<sup>vi</sup> Alain Badiou, ‘Rimbaud’s Method,’ in *Conditions*, *op. cit.*, 87.

Badiou’s emphasis.

<sup>vii</sup> Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013). For texts that have already addressed Badiou’s reading of Mallarmé in *Theory of the Subject*, see Oliver Feltham, *Alain Badiou: Live Theory* (London: Continuum, 2008) 44–47 and 129–133; Jean-François Hamel, *Camarade Mallarmé: Une politique de la lecture* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 2013) 152–160; Jean-Jacques Lecercle, *Badiou and*

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*Deleuze Read Literature*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011) 92–117; Pierre Macherey, “Le Mallarmé d’Alain Badiou,” in *Alain Badiou: Penser le Multiple* (Paris: Harmattan, 2002) 397–406; and Jacques Rancière, “Le poète chez le philosophe. Mallarmé et Badiou,” in *Politique de la littérature* (Paris: Galilée, 2007) 205–229. See also the brief remarks by Bruno Bosteels, *Badiou and Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011) 84.

<sup>viii</sup> For a compact statement on how Badiou perceives the political situation and his tasks, consider this passage: “Everyone in the strike and in the street for a precious, and in its own way, immortal commencement. But seven years later we are very few to hold up the subjective future and concentrated restricted action of all this...,” Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, 42.

<sup>ix</sup> In the ‘Preface,’ Badiou lists the intellectual mediocrities of the moment: “Those French intellectuals who have not stopped spitting on themselves, on ‘ideologies’, on Marxism, on the Masters, on their most incontestable experience, and who have given credibility to the formless and the multiple, to spontaneity and scattered memory, to rights and enjoyments, to works and days, have a painful responsibility in all of this — that of irresponsibility,” *ibid.*, xli. It is not difficult to read here a denunciation of the *nouveaux philosophes*, in particular Henri-Lévy and Glucksman, Deleuzians, even Situationists. For the fortunes of Marxism in particular, see *ibid.*, 197. See also “Renaissance de la philosophie, Entretien avec A. Badiou,” *Le Perroquet*, No. 6 (février 86).

<sup>x</sup> Well before the actual electoral victory of Mitterrand — that is, in 1975 — Badiou denounces *l’union de la gauche*: “seven years [after May ’68] we are very few to hold up the subjective future and concentrated restricted action of all this, in the midst of the sepulchral atmosphere of the *programme commun* and the prayers of Mitterrand the undertaker,” Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, *op. cit.*, 42. See also *ibid.*, xxxviii.

<sup>xi</sup> *Ibid.*, 8. Badiou’s emphasis.

<sup>xii</sup> *Ibid.*, 65–73.

<sup>xiii</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>xiv</sup> See *Ibid.*, 10–11.

<sup>xv</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>xvi</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>xvii</sup> *Ibid.*

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<sup>xviii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xix</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xx</sup> See, for a very clear statement of the necessity of a Maoist political party, Alain Badiou, “Théorie de la contradiction,” in *Les Années Rouges* (Paris: Les Prairies Ordinaires, 2012) 17–18: “The essence of the proletarian position does not reside in the episodes of class struggle but in the historical project that undergirds them — a project whose indefatigable duration and successive stages of proletarian obstinacy constitute the form of its practical existence ... Its clarification, its exposition — at once reflections and directives — alone do justice to the movement, which revolt reveals, of the class-being of phenomena. Only the Maoist enterprise develops integrally today what proletarians do and offer up to knowledge through the unconditional and permanent character of their revolt”. See also Alain Badiou, François Balmès, “De L’Idéologie,” in *Les Années Rouges, op. cit.*, 167–168, 180.

<sup>xxi</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>xxii</sup> Cited in *ibid.* 66. The syntagm comes from Mallarmé’s *Sacred Pleasure*, of which Badiou cites the following passage: “The crowd which begins to surprise us so much as a virgin element, or ourselves, fulfills for sounds the function of guardian of mystery! Its own! It compares its rich muteness to the orchestra, wherein lies the collective greatness.” In Stéphane Mallarmé, *Divagations*, tr. by Barbara Johnson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007) 390. For a reading of Mallarmé’s term “the crowd” that is most closely aligned with Badiou’s “egalitarian universalism,” see Bertrand Marchal, *La Religion de Mallarmé: poésie, mythologie et religion* (Paris: José Corti, 1988) 189: “The Mallarméan crowd has nothing to do with the Wagnerian *Volk*, even if in both cases the sacred experience requires a collective fervour. The crowd is not the depository of a national soul that would have to be reawakened by returning it to its mythical memory; rather, by its very diversity, it is like a cross-section of humanity, for whom it is less a matter of plunging back into the primitive stream of myth than back into the source of nature; less a question of seeking the origin of the nation and more the origin of man.” My translation.

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<sup>xxiii</sup> Cited in Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, *op. cit.*, *ibid.* Badiou ventriloquizes this latter syntagm when writing of “the infinite and mute capacity of the masses,” *ibid.*, 83.

<sup>xxiv</sup> *Ibid.*, 65. Badiou will return to mock these again on *ibid.*, 97.

<sup>xxv</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>xxvi</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>xxvii</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>xxviii</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>xxix</sup> *Ibid.* Badiou is here quoting from *Restricted Action*, but appears indifferent to the fact that the passage in question speaks of the “Book” as that which “does not demand a reader” — a curious property, if its *telos* is indeed to be an emblem for the contemplation of “the crowd.” See Stéphane Mallarmé, *Divagations*, *op. cit.*, 219.

<sup>xxx</sup> Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, *op. cit.*, 66.

<sup>xxxi</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>xxxii</sup> Note that Badiou, following Mallarmé, has already insisted on the lack of awareness that “the crowd” has of their capacity: “[Art] forms a space, which henceforth can be contemplated by the crowd from which it issues, *without knowing* it, since art exists ‘theatrically, for the crowd that, unconsciously and obliviously, hears its own grandeur’ (‘Music and Letters,’ D 190, tr. modified),” *ibid.*, 66. In *Theory of the Subject*, as well as in contemporaneous texts like *Théorie de la contradiction* and *De L’Idéologie*, it is, admittedly, less a question of “the crowd” being *unconscious* of their capacity but rather *corrupted* from within. For a sampling of discussions of the political division of the people, see Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, *op. cit.*, 8–9, 35, Alain Badiou, “Théorie de la contradiction,” in *Les Années Rouges*, *op. cit.*, 46, 52, 57, 67–68, and Alain Badiou, “De L’Idéologie,” in *Les Années Rouges*, *op. cit.*, 132–135.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>xxxiv</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>xxxv</sup> *Ibid.*, xli.

<sup>xxxvi</sup> Or indeed the Paris Commune. For a discussion of the figure of fireworks in Mallarmé’s text, see Frederic Dalmaso, “Badiou’s Spectator-Subject and Fireworks Politics,” *Performance Research: a Journal of the Performing Arts*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (2013). As Dalmaso points out, “Mallarmé’s depiction of the crowd watching fireworks as the substratum of mass uprising is particularly evocative in the

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context of the celebrations of the French *Fête Nationale* following the 1871 event. As pointed out by Colette Wilson, ‘the 1878 *Exposition universelle* and the *Fête du 30 juin* (Festival of 30 June) were both used to consolidate the early Third Republic’s effacement of Communard Paris’. However, the firework celebration seems to conjure up the memories it is seeking to erase in a spectacle affirming the grandeur of the State: for Parisians gathered around the Arc de Triomphe, the celebratory conflagrations directly echo the bombardment of Paris and the fires of May 1871 ... In this context, the firework celebration displays the political potential of the collective,” 77–78. For the surprisingly few remarks Badiou makes about Mallarmé and the Commune, see *Peut-on penser la politique?* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1985) 13, where he very briefly establishes a link between the poet’s political thought and the event of the Commune, and “Est-il exact que tout pensée émet un coup de dés?,” *op. cit.*, where the friendship between Mallarmé and Villiers de l’Isle-Adam, who was an avid witness to, and supporter of, the Commune, seems to excuse Mallarmé from the indifference he effectively displayed with respect to the events. See also *Conditions*, *op. cit.*, 151. For a contemporaneous discussion of Mallarmé and the Commune, see Julia Kristeva, *La révolution du langage poétique: L’avant-garde à la fin du XIXème siècle: Mallarmé et Lautréamont* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1974) 405–408.

<sup>xxxvii</sup> See Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, *op. cit.*, 98–100. See also the short reading Badiou proposes of this work in “Est-il exact que tout pensée émet un coup de dés?” *op. cit.* In this later reading, the “dimension of the sacred in [the] existence” of the workers is again aligned with their emancipatory political capacity, but this time this latter capacity is understood ontologically, in the terms of *Being and Event*, as that which is un-presented in, or as void with respect to, the situation of the workers. Badiou therefore gives us a clear ontological account of what the typically Romantic prophetic viewpoint of Mallarmé actually discerns, and which the poet enjoins us to *name*: “Mallarmé, you see, shows that what is at stake is, precisely, that that to which the thinking of the intervention is exposed in the invisibility of the workers can be *said*.” *Ibid.*

<sup>xxxviii</sup> Stéphane Mallarmé, *Divagations*, *op. cit.* 42.

<sup>xxxix</sup> Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, *op. cit.*, 98.

<sup>xl</sup> Cited, *ibid.*, xlii. The provenance of this citation is, in fact, the passage from Julien Gracq’s *Lettrines* from which Badiou liberally quotes in the ‘Preface.’ There, Badiou takes the hapless Communard commander to be a model of “the French intellectual[,] lost and useless.” What “the unfortunate delegate of the Commune” was guilty of, in Badiou’s reading, was being overtaken by events and

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failing to produce “the orders” and “the plan.” If Badiou identifies, albeit negatively, with this figure, then it is in part because he considers his duty to consist in being “a realist leader.”

<sup>xli</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>xlii</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>xliii</sup> Stéphane Mallarmé, *Divagations*, *op. cit.*, 46.

<sup>xliv</sup> Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, *op. cit.*, xli.

<sup>xlv</sup> For a compact statement of this thesis, see Bertrand Marchal, *La Religion de Mallarmé*, *op. cit.*, 389–391.

<sup>xlvi</sup> Cited, Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, *op. cit.*, 67.

<sup>xlvii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xlviii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xlix</sup> See also *ibid.*, 41.

<sup>l</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>li</sup> Ibid.

<sup>lii</sup> See also the following passage in *Theory of the Subject*: “Never expecting anything from the State, I hardly expect that the recent libations in honour of the rose (I’m writing this in July 1981) will make our largely disaffected national province flourish,” *ibid.*, xxxviii.

<sup>liii</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>liv</sup> Ibid.

<sup>lv</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>lvi</sup> Stéphane Mallarmé, *Divagations*, *op. cit.*, 264. Cited in Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, *op. cit.*, 85.

<sup>lvii</sup> Stéphane Mallarmé, *Divagations*, *op. cit.*, 290, Cited in Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, *op. cit.*, 85. My emphasis. See also the citation of this same passage in *Peut-on penser la politique?*, where Badiou deploys it in order to give credence to his thesis that “all [social] ensembles are inconsistent, that there are neither French nor proletarians...” Alain Badiou, *Peut-on penser la politique?*, *op. cit.*, 13. My translation. While in *Theory of the Subject* Badiou accepts the objective existence of classes, in *Peut-on penser la politique?*, by contrast, he draws on Mallarmé — and specifically on his thesis of the insubstantiality of all social bonds — to advance the exact opposite thesis, which, before him, Mallarmé — who he claims is “one of our greatest political thinkers, the equal, for in-



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stance, of Rousseau” — had advanced. See *ibid.* My translation. And for a compact statement of his understanding of class in *Theory of the Subject*, see Alain Badiou *Theory of the Subject* *op. cit.*, 26.  
<sup>lviii</sup> Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject* *op. cit.*, 86. Translation modified.

<sup>lix</sup> See Bertrand Marchal, *La Religion de Mallarmé*, *op. cit.*, 391: “To restructure the city symbolically is precisely to replace a religion that, at its centre, has been left empty through the ruin — at once intellectual and social, if not also religious — of the Church, with a religion that aims less to repress than to reveal, by a sort of ideal transparency, the irreducible negativity on which it is founded. In short, it is to rediscover, through a social fiction capable of exhibiting itself as such, a positivity in nothingness, and so re-establish, at the heart of the city as at the level of the principles of poetry, evidence of a ‘hollow musical core.’” My translation.

<sup>lx</sup> This is the way that Bruno Bosteels, in a seminal paper on Badiou’s *Theory of the Subject*, articulates the general tendency of Badiou’s thought: “the structural dialectic would remain profoundly idealist — its operation delivering at most a radical, arch-aesthetic or arch-political act that either renders visible the unbearable anxiety of the real itself, or ultimately calls upon the annihilation of the entire symbolic order in a mimicry of the revolutionary break ... Badiou’s thought, by contrast, seeks to be both dialectical and materialist in understanding the production of a new truth as the torsion, or forcing, of the entire situation from the precise point of a generic truth, as if the latter had already been added successfully onto the resources of knowledge available in this situation itself,” see Bruno Bosteels, “Alain Badiou’s Theory of the Subject: The Re-commendation of Dialectical Materialism? (Part II),” *Pli*, Vol. 13 (2002) 205.

<sup>lxi</sup> Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, *op. cit.*, 68.

<sup>lxii</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>lxiii</sup> *Ibid.*, 72. Translation modified.

<sup>lxiv</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>lxv</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>lxvi</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>lxvii</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

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lxviii Ibid., 55.

lxix Ibid., xli.

lxx Ibid., 65.

lxxi Ibid., 108.

lxxii Alain Badiou, "Théorie de la contradiction," *Les Années Rouges*, *op. cit.*, 42.

lxxiii "A la nue accablante tu/ Basse de basalte et de laves/ A même les échos esclaves/ Par une trompe sans vertu// Quel sépulcral naufrage (tu/ Le sais, écume, mais y baves)/ Suprême une entre les épaves/ Abolit le mâât dévêtu// Ou cela que furibond faute/ De quelque perdition haute/ Tout l'abîme vain éployé// Dans le si blanc cheveu qui traîne/ Avarement aura noyé/ Le flanc enfant d'une sirène." "Stilled beneath the oppressive cloud/ that basalt and lava base/ likewise the echoes that have bowed/ before a trumpet lacking grace// O what sepulchral wreck (the spray/ knows, but it simply drivels there)/ ultimate jetsam cast away/ abolishes the mast stripped bare// or else concealed that, furious/ failing some great catastrophe/ all the vain chasm gaping wide// in the so white and trailing tress/ would have drowned avariciously/ a siren's childlike side", cited in Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, *op. cit.*, 75.

lxxiv Ibid., 74. My emphasis.

lxxv "We must put an end to the laziness that has so many readers bypass the obstacle in order to claim that the enigma's virtue consists in allowing a hundred underlying answers. This absolute dialectician does not present any 'polysemy'. One should not take for an erratic chaos whatever is given multiple echoes, based on the firm and consecutive encipherment of the One-of-meaning, by those remarkable stampings with which the poem illuminates and extinguishes itself," *ibid.*, 74-75.

lxxvi See, for Badiou's parsing of the single-sentence sonnet, *ibid.*, 75-76.

lxxvii Ibid., 76.

lxxviii Ibid.

lxxix Ibid., 77.

lxxx Ibid., 87.

lxxxi Ibid., 68.

lxxxii Ibid., 55.

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<sup>lxxxiii</sup> See, for Badiou's more properly conceptual discussion of this point, *ibid.*, 68–69.

<sup>lxxxiv</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>lxxxv</sup> While in both *Theory of the Subject* and *Conditions* Badiou registers the fact that there is an ambiguity as to whether the siren is drowned or rather simply dives beneath the surface, he makes nothing of this distinction, which is nevertheless central to the readings of Rancière, Marchal and Benichou. See Jacques Rancière, *Mallarmé. La Politique de la sirène*, *op. cit.*, 24; Bertrand Marchal, *Lecture de Mallarmé : Poésies, Igitur, Le coup de dés* (Paris: José Corti, 1985) 253; Paul Bénichou, *Selon Mallarmé* (Paris: Gallimard, 1995).

<sup>lxxxvi</sup> Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, *op. cit.*, 79.

<sup>lxxxvii</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>lxxxviii</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>lxxxix</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>xc</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>xc i</sup> *Ibid.*, 78–79.

<sup>xc ii</sup> Badiou will go no further, however, in his investigation of the semantics of these terms, as other commentators do. For example, the semantic distinction between the shipwreck and the siren is central to Rancière's reading, itself inspired by Davies and Marchal. For Rancière, this semantic distinction is so significant it allows him to see in the veritable paradox of *une sirène noyée* the principle of the poet's aesthetic and to determine that Mallarmé finally decides, *pace* Badiou, what the "vanishing term" in fact is. See Jacques Rancière, *Mallarmé. La Politique de la sirène*, *op. cit.*, 23–25; Jacques Rancière, *Politique de la littérature*, *op. cit.*, 210. For Badiou's claim that the provenance of the foam is undecidable, see Alain Badiou, *Conditions*, *op. cit.*, 112–113.

<sup>xc iii</sup> See, for his properly conceptual demonstration of this point, *ibid.*, 70–72.

<sup>xc iv</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>xc v</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>xc vi</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>xc vii</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>xc viii</sup> *Ibid.*, My emphasis.

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<sup>xcix</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>c</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>ci</sup> Ibid.

<sup>cii</sup> Ibid., 99. In his discussion of modeling in Badiou's work, Oliver Feltham points to this self-reflexive moment as proof that Badiou does not simply repeat the imposing and appropriative moves of philosophers when faced with literary works: "Badiou thus attributes self-reflexivity to the poem: what it says is a reflection of what it actually does, which is to stage the vanishing of the concept of the structural dialectic under the surface of the sea," Oliver Feltham, *Alain Badiou: Live Theory*, *op. cit.*, 130. However, this presupposes that Badiou is in fact correct in his description of the relation between the two vanishing terms; and that the movement of the poem is indeed to be understood as being engineered by this self-conscious application of the structural dialectic to itself. However, as Rancière shows, the relation between the two vanishing terms is far more complex. See Jacques Rancière, *Mallarmé: La politique de la sirène*, *op. cit.*, 23–25.

<sup>ciii</sup> Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, *op. cit.*, 81.

<sup>civ</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>cv</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>cvi</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>cvii</sup> Ibid., 87–88

<sup>cviii</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>cix</sup> Cited in *ibid.* For a striking example of the way Badiou dramatically shifts his reading of Mallarmé between *Theory of the Subject* and *Being and Event*, see his elision of certain key terms from this passage in *Igitur* in *Being and Event*, Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, 191.

<sup>cx</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>cx</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>cxii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>cxiii</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>cxiv</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>cxv</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>cxvi</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>cxvii</sup> Ibid., 89.

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<sup>cxviii</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>cxix</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>cxx</sup> Ibid.

<sup>cxxi</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>cxxii</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>cxxiii</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>cxxiv</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>cxxv</sup> Ibid.

<sup>cxxvi</sup> Ibid.

<sup>cxxvii</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>cxxviii</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>cxxix</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>cxxxx</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>cxxxi</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>cxxxii</sup> Ses purs ongles très haut dédiant leur onyx,/ L'Angoisse, ce  
minuit, soutient, lampadophore,/ Maint rêve vespéral brûlé par le  
Phénix/ Que ne recueille pas de cinéraire amphore// Sur les  
crédences, au salon vide : nul ptyx/ Aboli bibelot d'inanité sonore/  
(Car le Maître est allé puiser des pleurs au Styx/ Avec ce seul objet  
dont le Néant s'honore).// Mais proche la croisée au nord vacante,  
un or/ Agonise selon peut-être le décor// Des licornes ruant du feu  
contre une nixe,// Elle, défunte nue en le miroir, encor/ Que, dans  
l'oubli fermé par le cadre, se fixe/ De scintillations sitôt le septuor.

<sup>cxxxiii</sup> See, for a classic presentation of the notion of *le drame solaire*,  
Gardner Davies, *Mallarmé et le Drame Solaire: essai d'exégèse rai-  
sonnée* (Paris: José Corti, 1959) 7–39.

<sup>cxxxiv</sup> Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, *op. cit.*, 101.

<sup>cxxxv</sup> Gardner Davies, *Mallarmé et le Drame Solaire: essai d'exégèse  
raisonnée*, *op. cit.*, 108. My translation.

<sup>cxxxvi</sup> Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, *op. cit.*, 108.

<sup>cxxxvii</sup> Ibid., 107. This act of division is, of course, functionally equiva-  
lent to the task that Badiou has already set the Maoist militant:  
namely, that of being “the lookout for the vanishing term, emblem  
of the new within the old,” *ibid.*, 71.

<sup>cxxxviii</sup> See Gardner Davies, *Mallarmé et le drame solaire*, *op. cit.*, 116–

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<sup>cxxxix</sup> Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, *op. cit.*, 105. Translation modified.

<sup>cxl</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>cxli</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>cxlii</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

<sup>cxliii</sup> Gardner Davies, *Mallarmé et le drame solaire*, *op. cit.*, 124–125.

Translation modified.

<sup>cxliv</sup> Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, *op. cit.*, 108.

<sup>cxlv</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>cxlvi</sup> Gardner Davies, *Mallarmé et le drame solaire*, *op. cit.*, 134. My translation.

<sup>cxlvii</sup> Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, *op. cit.*, 87.

<sup>cxlviii</sup> Badiou draws here on a note from Gardner Davies. See *ibid.*, 136, No. 19: “An Australian poet, Christopher Brennan, who corresponded with Mallarmé, completes the interpretation of this final image by an observation that we would hesitate to include were it not linked to a passage from *Les Dieux antiques*. Brennan identifies the nymph of the mirror with Callisto, who was banished from the court of Artemis and transformed into a bear, before being placed in the sky by Jupiter in the form of a constellation.” My translation.

<sup>cxlix</sup> Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, *op. cit.*, 103.

<sup>cl</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>cli</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>clii</sup> *Ibid.*, 108–109.

<sup>cliii</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>cliv</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.