

Alain Badiou. *Wittgenstein's Antiphilosophy.*

trans. Bruno Bosteels.

London, UK: Verso, 2011. ISBN: 9781844676941

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Alain Badiou is arguably the most widely read living French philosopher, which means that an increasing number of his texts are coming into English translation. *Wittgenstein's Antiphilosophy (WA)* is not a major work of his, like *Being and Event* or *Logics of Worlds*, that elaborates his own philosophical project. It is, rather, a brief, compressed treatment of a figure who would be contemptuous towards Badiou's conception of philosophy, and yet who serves as an important interlocutor for it.

WA treats Wittgenstein's oeuvre—principally, the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*—as representative of an antiphilosophical “canon” of sorts that also includes Heraclitus, Saint Paul, Pascal, Kierkegaard, Rousseau, Nietzsche, and Lacan. What divides philosophy from antiphilosophy (a term that Badiou takes from Lacan [75]) is that philosophy is the realm of impersonal propositions that can “say” points of the real (133). Antiphilosophy, meanwhile, valorises the unsayable rather than axiomatic truths, and concerns itself with the act that overcomes philosophy, or with life.

Badiou outlines the antiphilosophy of Wittgenstein in two parts. The first, much longer, section is based on Badiou's seminar at the École Normale Supérieure in Paris, which, in the 1990s, was devoted to investigating

four major antiphilosophers: Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, Lacan, and Saint Paul (13). It lays out the key, axiomatic features of Wittgenstein's antiphilosophy, along with the characteristics it shares with the work of other antiphilosophers.

Badiou begins by setting out the three operations which can be used to recognise antiphilosophy "from its origins" (which, he tells us, date back to Heraclitus). The first is antiphilosophy's "deposing of the category of truth; an unraveling of the pretensions of philosophy as a theory" (75). Wittgenstein asserts in the *Tractatus* that what is wrong with philosophical propositions and questions is not that they are false, but rather that they are nonsensical, or deprived of sense.¹ Given that Wittgenstein also defines thought as a proposition *with* sense, Badiou infers that Wittgenstein holds philosophy to be non-thought. Worse, philosophy "pretends to present the nonsense that is proper to it within a propositional and theoretical register" (77).

The second characteristic operation of antiphilosophy is its recognition that philosophy "cannot be reduced to its discursive appearance, its propositions, its fallacious theoretical exterior" (75). Instead, antiphilosophers hold that philosophy is in fact "an act, of which the fabrications about 'truth' are the clothing, the propaganda, the lies" (75). This philosophical activity consists in claiming more than is proper to the realm of the sayable (or of the proposition). Philosophy attempts "to bend non-thought by force into the theoretical proposition" (79), and then act as if something deep or metaphysical had been said.

The third operation of antiphilosophy is the antiphilosophical act itself, which "overcomes" philosophy by undoing its nonsensical search "to incarnate 'the problems of life' in theoretical propositions" (79). As opposed to philosophy's illegitimate accessing of non-thought, which erases the line between the sayable and the unsayable, the antiphilosophical act consists in letting "what there is" beyond language show itself. It is a pure, "archi-aesthetic" clarification which allows what cannot be placed in a linguistic picture to make itself manifest (80).

Badiou reads the *Tractatus* as Wittgenstein's attempt to clearly define the narrow confines of the sayable in order to present clearly what cannot be said (the mystical, or God). As such, a large part of *WA* is devoted to an elaboration of the ontology of substance and of the world contained in the *Tractatus*. This ontology is elaborated, Badiou says, in a tight, to-and-fro movement between "what is" and "what is said" (93–4), yet Wittgenstein's ultimate concern is not with this construction itself (which Badiou describes as being comprised of "an ontology of objects and a logic of elementary propositions" [177]) but rather with the remnant that escapes it. Antiphilos-

ophy “builds very subtle networks of relations but only to track down the incompleteness in them and to expose the remainder to its seizure by way of the act” (94).

Badiou draws attention to the strong affinity that exists between antiphilosophy and Christianity. Antiphilosophers of “strong caliber,” he says, such as Pascal, Rousseau, Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein, stand in an “essential relation” (83) to Christianity, as do figures that might not be thought to have any such kinship, such as Nietzsche and Lacan (“Nietzsche’s enraged hatred is at least as strong as a bond of love” [83]). Badiou does not mean by this that Christianity is important for antiphilosophers in an established or institutional sense. Rather, what “Christianity” names is a material outside of philosophy that may be grasped so as to name “the singularity” of the antiphilosophical act (84).

For Wittgenstein, Christianity is an aesthetic affair that involves “a clarification of the sense of life, which is also a sense of the world” (84). It is “life ordered in accordance with its unsayable meaning, the ‘beautiful’ life, which is the same as the saintly life” (85). For Wittgenstein, the meaning of the world lies outside of the sayable and outside of the limits of the world. “Christianity,” then, names “the most accomplished aesthetic form for showing that which, under the name of God, agrees with the feeling of the limits of the world” (85).

In support of his claims about antiphilosophy and Christianity, Badiou draws attention to the importance of the confessional mode or biological impulse in the writing of Pascal, Rousseau, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Lacan and Wittgenstein. Rather than speaking anonymously in the universal, as the philosopher does, antiphilosophers make their own lives and bodies the theatre of their ideas. This explains the “writerly” style of the antiphilosopher, who “speaks *in his proper name*” and exhibits himself as “an existential singularity” (87, italics in original).

WA contains many surprising asides, such as Badiou’s remark that there is a connection between antiphilosophers’ granting of greater value to that which cannot be captured within doctrines or philosophical systems—the valorisation of “the remainder”—and their detestable treatment of women and the feminine. “The more flagrant the misogyny,” Badiou says, the more we are in the vicinity of antiphilosophy” (96). Because the antiphilosopher’s own life is the stage of their thought, it is legitimate, Badiou seems to suggest, to draw theoretical conclusions from the biographical details of their lives—from Kierkegaard’s neurosis about marriage, or Wittgenstein’s “half-frankness of a half-homosexuality” (95).

The most unredeemable sin of Wittgenstein, and indeed of all antiphilosophers, is his hostility towards mathematics. “The contempt for mathe-

matics,” Badiou warns, “is something from which no philosophy can lift itself up again” (71). Wittgenstein, inexcusably, reduces mathematics to mere equations and blind calculations, or, in his later work, to anthropological language games. Badiou, on the other hand, holds mathematics to be a thought of being with the power to address questions about “the suture of existents to their being, of infinity, of the composition of multiplicities, of typification” (142).

Although Badiou never exactly polemicises against Wittgenstein (which is apparently one of the graces of philosophy: “the philosophical style ignores the complaint” [133]), the points at which their respective positions differ fall under a principal theme: the fact that Wittgenstein’s ontology results in “a considerable extension of non-thought, which is unacceptable to the philosopher” (107). The refusal to consider mathematics as thought is one aspect of this. Another is the question of whether poetry belongs to thought or to non-thought. For Badiou, poetry has a sole axiom: “everything that participates in being ... has a name. The difficulty lies in inventing it” (109). For Wittgenstein, on the other hand, poetry is not thought, but a verbal instance of silence (109).

The first twelve chapters of *WA* focus almost solely on the *Tractatus*, as Badiou does not consider anything after this to be legitimately part of Wittgenstein’s oeuvre. “All his [Wittgenstein’s] ‘sayings,’” Badiou declares, “piously recollected and edited after his death, are only ... glosses that are ultimately murderous on a single and powerful *écrit*: the *Tractatus*” (158). This position puts Badiou at odds with Anglo-American, analytical interpretations of Wittgenstein, which he dismisses as “twentieth-century scholasticism, as impressive for its institutional force as it is contrary to everything that Wittgenstein the mystic, the aesthete, the Stalinist of spirituality, could have desired” (71).

The second part of *WA* considers the languages, styles, or rhetorics of Wittgenstein, as well as the status of philosophical writing more generally. Badiou follows Wittgenstein’s remark, in *Culture and Value*, that philosophy “ought really only to be written as a *poetic composition*.”² Badiou characterises the *Tractatus* as a montage of aphoristic propositions, each of which is expressed in an affirmative syntax (166). Moreover, it is a book, he says, which shares the Mallarméan dream of rendering all other books unnecessary (162). The ultimate effect of its appearance of completeness and internal rigour, however, is to show “how little is achieved” when the problems of philosophy are solved.³ For what is important for Wittgenstein, Badiou says, is not the written doctrine, but changing one’s life: the written word is ultimately discardable once its effects have been brought about. Badiou’s description of the *Tractatus*’ style contains one of the remarks of

WA that I found most extraordinary:

this unilateral importance of “changing one’s life” is the side of Rimbaud in Wittgenstein, whereas the care given to the montage, the disposition of the page, the inessential solidity of the syntax, is his Mallarméan side. The *Tractatus* is a bit like *A Season in Hell* written in the form of *A Throw of Dice* (169).

Badiou has few kind words, however, for the *Philosophical Investigations*, the rhetoric of which is described as an “irritating, deceptive but essential harrasment” (170) or “the style of the bee: torment and sting” (169).

WA is a striking reading of Wittgenstein’s work. Badiou’s discussion of the styles of Wittgenstein, and the writerly or literary qualities of the *Tractatus*, made me excited about tackling the *Tractatus* as an aesthetic composition. Badiou’s ability to call forth quotations from Wittgenstein that precisely corroborate his interpretations—axioms from the horse’s mouth—grant persuasiveness to his writing, particularly at those points where his claims seem the most ambitious.

There is almost something mythical in the way that Badiou talks about the antiphilosophical figures that line the corridor of history, engaged in frozen battles with their philosophical counterparts like so many marble friezes in a museum. His language is animated and dramatic—perhaps at times a little over the top—and one is never in any doubt as to which “side” Badiou is on. I wondered, consequently, at the neatness with which Badiou is able to produce his lists of antiphilosophers throughout the ages, as if the question of what philosophy is had been decided long ago.

To use a term of Deleuze and Guattari’s, what WA provides is a sketch of Wittgenstein as a “conceptual persona” who, much like a character in a novel, gives dramatic sense to the image of thought set out by Badiou.⁴ The antiphilosophical Wittgenstein exposes us to “risks” (107), yet is nevertheless an “awakener” as to the conditions of philosophy (67). Badiou presents Wittgenstein as an instructive rival.

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NOTES

1 For example in proposition 4.003: “Most of the propositions and questions to be found in philosophical works are not false but nonsensical.” *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 22.

2 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, ed. G. H. von Wright, trans. Peter Winch (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 25.

3 Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 4.

4 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 61–83.