

**ALAIN BADIOU (2009) *POCKET PANTHEON*. TRANS.
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In an introductory pronouncement that somewhat belies the diminutive size of this volume of post-war philosophers, (though not, perhaps, its title), Alain Badiou's sometime adversary Slavoj Žižek, no less, announces that: "A figure like Plato or Hegel walks here among us!" (Badiou, 2009a: back cover). It is left to the author himself, meanwhile, to stake a rather more modest claim for his own place within the elevated constellation of French philosophers selected for inclusion in *Pocket Pantheon*.

In the article 'Adventures in French Philosophy' (*New Left Review*), for example, Badiou refers to the period between the publication of Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* (1943) and Deleuze's *What is Philosophy?* (1991) thus: 'Bachelard, Merleau-Ponty, Lévi-Strauss, Althusser, Foucault, Derrida and Lacan as well as Sartre and Deleuze – and myself, maybe. Time will tell; though if there has been such a French philosophical moment, my position would be as perhaps its last representative' (Badiou, 2005: 67-68). Not a grandiose claim for pre-eminence then, though it is worth noting that Badiou's selection is intended to represent 'a French philosophical moment of the second half of the 20th century which...bears comparison to the examples of classical Greece and enlightenment Germany' (Badiou, 2005: 67).

In a similar vein, *Pocket Pantheon's* project is to present in essay form the ideas of a number of French philosophers who have influenced developments in Badiou's work. In part, Badiou aims to draw comparisons between a golden age of the past and the somewhat less elevated present. The ideas of Plato, for instance, are invoked in the second page of the preface, or 'Overture', as he would have it, a recurring theme

in Badiou's work. However, in spite of the title's invocation of Ancient Greece, the book's remit remains a modest one, encompassing as it does post-war twentieth century philosophers, ranging from Jacques Lacan (1901-1981) to Françoise Proust (1947-1998).

Badiou's initial working title for the book, *Funeral Orations*, is significant, suggestive not only of the deceased nature of its subjects but also of his somewhat impassioned, perhaps even elegiac approach to them. From the outset, it is clear that Badiou has no wish to maintain an objective distance. On the contrary, as he himself declares, 'I love all these fourteen dead philosophers. Yes, I love them' (Badiou a: xii), and what follows is a rather self-consciously anecdotal but no less insightful journey through key moments in twentieth century French philosophy in the company of a thoughtful, frequently polemical (and at times name-dropping) guide.

Indeed, it is fair to say that Badiou assumes the persona of the *philosopher-writer* throughout the book in accordance with point six of his own manifesto, whose aim is 'To create a new style of philosophical exposition, and so to compete with literature; essentially, to reinvent in contemporary terms the 18th-century figure of the philosopher-writer' (Badiou, 2005: 76). This approach is perhaps not so surprising. After all, elsewhere Badiou has made it clear that philosophers should be 'taking [philosophy] out of the academy and putting it into circulation in daily life' (Badiou, 2005: 76). To this end, Badiou wishes, 'to banish the meditative or professorial image of the philosopher; to make the philosopher something other than a sage, and so other than a rival to the priest' (Badiou, 2005: 76).

It is interesting to note that these sentiments are echoed by a member of the pantheon, Michel Foucault, who, during an interview with Alessandro Fontana and Pasquale Pasquino, opined that: 'For a long period, the "left" intellectual spoke and was acknowledged the right of speaking in the capacity of master of truth and justice. He was heard...as the spokesman of the universal. To be an intellectual meant something like being the consciousness/conscience of us all' (Foucault in Rabinow, 1991: 67).

It is interesting to note that Foucault locates this tradition in Marxism, especially so considering Badiou's active engagement in left-wing politics, and his insistence that

We must absolutely distinguish philosophy from politics. There are political commitments that are illuminated by philosophy, or even made distinct by philosophy, but philosophy and politics are distinct. Politics aims at the transformation of collective situations, while philosophy seeks to propose new problems for everyone. And this proposition concerning new philosophical problems constitutes an entirely different method, an entirely different form of judgement than the one which pertains to direct political militancy. (Badiou & Žižek, 2009: 22)

Unsurprisingly, then, the two philosophers diverge on the rightful role of the progressive intellectual/philosopher/sage figure. In contrast to Badiou's commitment to political engagement as exemplified by his admiring description of Sartre as 'a great fellow traveller when we act' (Badiou, 2009a: 35), for Foucault the intellectual's proper role is to overturn existing regimes of truth/power, to constitute what he terms 'a new politics of truth. The problem is not changing people's consciousnesses – or what's in their heads – but the political, economic, institutional regime of the production of truth' (Foucault, 1991: 74).

Such speculations concerning the philosophical role aside, what follows in terms of the present work is a somewhat nostalgic 'tribute' to philosophers Badiou has known (and, in some cases, quarrelled with), some of whom he goes so far as to hail 'the masters of my youth' (Badiou, 2009a: xii).

The essentially nostalgic component of Badiou's project is clear from the outset. These dead philosophers are being marshalled in support of the philosophy on offer in past ages, in contrast with what he argues to be the distorted and debased philosophy on offer in the contemporary age. Thus, instead of urging people to fight capitalism and passivity, he argues philosophy now operates in the service of consumer capitalism, reinforces a philosophy of consumerism, summed

up by the slogan: 'Cling to your illusions, prepare to surrender' (Badiou, 2009a: ix); *accept the way things are, don't think for yourself, passively consume yourself into oblivion.*

And so, the essentially polemical aspects of the work are revealed. Badiou's mission is to prove contemporary philosophy false via the medium of philosophy's past glories. That said, it is not always entirely clear what the precise nature of this problem is, though it appears to revolve around definitions of philosophy itself in addition to its political permutations and the false prophets of contemporary media and capitalist-inflected philosophy.

Either way, Badiou enlists his philosophical pantheon to demonstrate that there is one true philosophy, that philosophy has one central, univocal meaning and purpose. This notion of a single philosophical question is echoed elsewhere in Badiou's work, even in the slightly unexpected context of the preface to *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency* by Quentin Meillassoux, wherein he reflects that, 'there is no doubt that a philosopher is born of a single question, the question which arises at the intersection of thought and life at a given moment in the philosopher's youth; the question which one must at all costs find a way to answer' (Badiou, 2009b: vi). This is a bold assertion and not one which is especially verifiable. Still, it accords with Badiou's unashamedly subjective (and at times deliberately provocative) approach to philosophy, both as discipline and practice.

As far as the present work is concerned, Badiou cites the Maoist dictum: 'Hold to the truth, cast away illusions, and fight rather than surrender, whatever the circumstances' (Badiou, 2009a: ix) in support of his contentions. He is effectively throwing down the gauntlet here, issuing a challenge to what he terms the 'falsifiers', those who seek to muddy the philosophical waters and commodify philosophy, dabbling in fashionable cause célèbres, indulging their mystifications and sophistry. The outcome of all this? A poverty of philosophical ideas. This is Badiou's challenge, then: to cut a swathe through this obfuscation, the veil of illusion, to the true path of philosophical enlightenment accompanied of course by members of the philosophical pantheon.

Badiou proceeds to offer a series of meditative essays on the work of the members of the pantheon in various guises under the organising principle of the tribute. The book benefits from this lack of formality in the sense that one encounters refreshingly anecdotal accounts of famous philosophers, and is thus enabled to see the illustrious dead men (and very occasionally women) of French philosophy through the eyes of someone who knew them, via the medium of the vignette. And so, Jean Hyppolite is pictured with, 'his eternal cigarette holder – you could always see smoke rising over his head whatever the circumstances' (Badiou, 2009a: 41); while Sartre is ascribed a 'strange voice...both nasal and cavernous' (Badiou, 2009a: 43).

Paradoxically, perhaps, the strengths of this book have the potential to be its weakness. Those who prefer their philosophers 'straight', as it were, unmediated by the emotive tone of Badiou's synopses, should probably steer clear (though, in his defence, this style of engaged, subjectivist philosophy is precisely what Badiou has set out to achieve). The somewhat coy references to 'yours truly' (Badiou, 2009a: 44) when in illustrious company (in this case including Sartre and Merleau-Ponty), for example, may well grate on some, and certainly this book is not without its self-aggrandising elements.

That said, Badiou continues to be a highly influential and innovative philosopher, whose philosophy has been judged to be no less than 'a philosophy of the infinite' (Mullarkey, 2006: 23), and whether one warms to his sometimes self-satisfied tone here is perhaps beside the point. Badiou stakes a claim to alternative, subjective terrain here and, judged on his own terms at any rate, he is largely successful in this enterprise.

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