

The Mythical Countertextual: From Derrida to Badiou

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The modern era stages a confrontation between humanity and its finitude. God is dead. The thing in itself, the world as it is in itself, *us* as we are in ourselves, are all recognised as being ultimately beyond our cognitive grasp. The realisation that the act of thinking cannot be fully taken into consideration in the thought that is produced by that act, forces the yawning of the chasm out of which a veritable plague of dualisms emerge. No matter how hard or deeply we think, a part of who or what we are – perhaps the constitutive part – remains irrevocably in the shadows. Without being able to take account of this in a way that might allow us to subtract it from what already counts as knowledge, to reveal the pure datum unsullied, as it were, by human hands, such knowledge – which might previously have been considered absolute – is revealed as irredeemably relational. To say what something *is*, is always, on some level, to say what it is *for us*. What this means is that even that of which we are most sure must, in the last analysis, be considered subjective. It is in this regard that Badiou speaks of ‘dis-objectivation’ and of ‘the destitution of the category of object’, characteristics of what he refers to as ‘the age of poets’ [manifesto for philosophy, 72].)

What Badiou calls the Age of Poets, and what might be more readily understood as Romanticism and its Modernist legacy, developed out of the perceived failure of

philosophy. The promise of the Enlightenment to rationally establish foundational first principles upon which humankind could build, had unravelled in dualism and the threat of nihilism. Tethered, as it appeared, to an inescapable subjectivism, thought could never be equal to being – there would always be an opaque remainder – and the self-reflective subject – precisely insofar as she is self-reflective – would remain, at least at the level of cognition, cut off from her own being [here ontology remains an ideal but unviable; with poststructuralism it is dissolved into the subject altogether]. The post-Kantian subject is, in Fichte's phrase, caught between incapacity and demand, futilely striving for knowledge that is not conditional upon itself, the subject. Knowledge that is, in other words, unconditioned or Absolute. 'We look everywhere for the unconditional absolute, and all we find are the conditions', writes Novalis. The turn to art, in particular the promise of poetry, that this exhaustion of philosophy prompts, is well-documented; most notably, perhaps, by Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy's *The Literary Absolute*. The Romantic idea *par excellence*, is that by performing, by acting out the failure of reflective thought in the artwork, it might be possible to gesture beyond the limits of cognition, opening a space, albeit momentarily, in which the unconditioned might be encountered. This unworking of the artwork is, as everyone from Benjamin to Blanchot has asserted, the work of the artwork.

Often this Romantic turn to art is presented as a reaction against Platonism, both against his logocentrism, and against his expulsion of the poets from the polis (two things that are, of course, related). Romanticism recognised that the focus on discrete objects in isolation – i.e. presence – was always at the exclusion of the wider framing (which, for

the Romantics, was believed to be subjective) of the object that allowed it to appear in the first place. It was, simply, an incorrect way of being in the world; one that resulted from an excessive emphasis on reason or logos over poiesis (or muthos). Romanticism, then, redressed the balance, claiming for poetry a form of knowledge that wasn't subjectively conditioned. Against Plato, it could then be claimed that poetry was, far from being a misleading imitation, in fact possessed of knowledge and truth.

Although the naivety of early German Romanticism was short-lived (Lukacs famously called it a wildly improbable dream, like dancing on the edge of a glowing volcano), the influence of this guiding Romantic idea and the structural apparatus it supported is evident in post- and proto-poststructuralism, as well as in psychoanalysis. However, whereas for the Romantics it was reflective thought that put a deeper connection with the world (or, more grandly, with being) beyond our cognitive grasp, in the twentieth century, particularly in the light of modern linguistics, that which distances us is language and that from which we are distanced is a totalising conception of the operation of language itself, unconditioned by our use of it and its use of us. There might not be any outside the text, but what is denied us, as textual beings, is the exposure of that textuality beyond a subjective textual node. Even though poststructuralism announces the mutual collapse of the subject and ontology into one another, there remains a non-coincidence between thought (that is, language, the operation of textuality in the individual, textuality configured as an individual) and being (that is, the constantly drifting, changing textuality viewed, impossibly, from nowhere – textuality risen to a sort of Hegelian Geist-like self-knowledge). The finite poststructural individual, always already mediated by the web of

signifying processes out of which it emerges, is called to act, is motivated by the play of textuality that, ultimately, is beyond it, conditioning it. It is this aspect of textuality that, because of its transcendental opacity, I propose calling *counter-textual*, exploiting in so doing the dual meaning of counter which made the word a favourite of Derrida's, as opposition but also proximity – both against and next-to or with. Unconditioned, absolute textuality is, to use Wallace Stevens' phrase, 'both beyond us and yet ourselves'. It cannot be called to account [logos = account etc], it resists demonstration and verification, the more we try to pin it down the more it flees our grasp, and yet without it the possibility of a meaningful existence would, at the very least, be cast into doubt.

Differance in Derrida, the night that is other in Blanchot, Khora in Kristeva and Derrida, as well as the unconscious and the real in the schemas of many writers, have all been presented as versions of this countertextual. The common characteristic which confirms them as such is that they cannot be presented, articulated, or brought to light in any way without severe distortion, and yet they are believed to underpin and make possible the very discursivity they resist. They are in close proximity to clarifying, conceptualising language, may even be said to be with it indissociably, but they are also against it, opposed to it and cut off from it. The countertextual is the indemonstrable on which all demonstration stands [Fichte's phrase]. Its status is then, one might say, mythical. As such it is liable to arouse desire. Just as the Romantics had striven for the Absolute or the unconditioned, we might feel inclined, or perhaps one should say driven, to encounter, all be it fleetingly, in an experience entirely impossible, the countertextual, that which stands over and against meaning as the inarticulable condition of signification.

In a move that is clearly Romantic in its origins, and which, recalling Badiou's phrase, shows that we are still very much in the Age of Poets, the possibility of somehow touching upon the countertextual has typically been proffered through poetry. In all cases it is poetry's radical indirectness, however construed, which affords it this privileged position. A straightforward, logically discursive account would be inimical to the mythical countertextual, and so it must be approached awry. Our desire to possess the countertextual, to have it made present for us, must, paradoxically, be self-denying, if we are to move towards it. Were the countertextual a reticent lover, she would have to be courted gently, indirectly, using the sophisticated arts of seduction. And the more indirect and sophisticated the art, the better. In this broad outline, the myth of the countertextual, presented in various guises, has proved extraordinarily pervasive.

It will no doubt be obvious that part of the power of this myth can be attributed to the fact that it is, at least structurally, a retelling of that archetypal myth of self-denying desire channelled into art, the tale of Orpheus, in which as we know, Orpheus can only approach Euridyce indirectly, by means of his song.

This leads us to what is perhaps the most noteworthy aspect of myth in the Age of the Poets, and it clusters around two paradoxes:

Firstly, that which is unconditioned, the non-subjective – what we have been calling the countertextual, but what we might, with a little more explanation, have called the

absolute or the real – retains its power as such only to the extent that it is transformed into myth, which one might reasonably consider to be its opposite.

Rendering the unconditioned or the real mythical is not to weaken it. On the contrary, in fact. In the post-Kantian world, one might somewhat hesitantly conclude, the real, the non-subjective, is more powerful as myth, than it is as demonstrable fact or logos. It is, though, as I have suggested, peculiarly self-denying, even in ways that go beyond its Orphic parallels. We tend to think of myths as stories, but if the mythical countertextual is a story at all, it is the story of the impossibility of its telling.

And this leads us to the second paradox, which is that the only myth in a position of dominance in philosophy and theory today (taken seriously, that is) is one that remains (in the term Badiou uses in relation to Derrida) inexistent (insofar as it is countertextual). It is the myth of the impossibility of a story, a telling, a naming, the myth of the impossibility of myth, one might say.

But although this is a characteristic of the Age of the Poets, its origins can be traced back much further. Back, indeed, to the beginning of philosophy. In the *Timaeus*, Plato's remarkable account of his cosmology, we are introduced to the difficult concept of the *Khora*, which Plato introduces as a third genus, intermediate (as a sort of mother figure) between the eternal forms (the father) and their imitations (the children, that is, observable particulars). In other words, the notion of the *Khora* is a way of attempting to mediate between the intelligible and the sensible. Plato introduces it, however, with

extreme hesitation – trepidation almost – calling it ‘difficult of explanation and dimly seen’. The Khora, we are told, is the receptacle or nurse of all generation. It is ‘space, and is eternal, and admits not of destruction and provides a home for all created things’. It also carries the wider connotations of site, region and womb. It is likened to a plastic, impressionable stuff (50c2–6, e7–51a1), and an ointment that serves as a neutral base for various fragrances. As these images suggest, it is without characteristics in its own right [lifted from stanford]. Indeed, it is in itself nothing; it *is* only in so far as that which emerges from it is. As Derrida puts it in the essay *Khora*:

Khora receives, so as to give place to them, all the determinations, but she-it does not possess any of them as her/its own. She possesses them, she has them, since she receives them, but she does not possess them as properties, she does not possess anything as her own. She ‘is’ nothing other than the sum or the process of what has just been inscribed ‘on’ her, on the subject of her, on her subject, right up against her subject, but she is not the *subject* or the *present support* of all these interpretations, even though, nevertheless, she is not reducible to them. Simply this excess is nothing, nothing that may be and be said ontologically. [99]

How does one gain proximity to this ‘thing’ that *is* not? Unsurprisingly, as a countertextual archetype, one does so indirectly. Derrida goes on:

We would never claim to propose the exact word, the *mot juste*, for *khora*, nor to name it, *itself*, over and above all the turns and detours of rhetoric, nor finally to approach it, *itself*, for what it will have been, outside of any point of view, outside of any anachronic perspective. Its name is not an exact word, not a *mot juste*. It is

promised to the ineffaceable even if what it names, *khora*, is not reduced to its name. [*khora*, 93-4]

Plato himself tells us that the essentially errant Khora ‘is itself apprehended by a kind of bastard reasoning that does not involve sense perception, and it is hardly even an object of conviction. We look at it as in a dream when we say that everything that exists must of necessity be somewhere, in some place and occupying some space’.

The Khora, then, calls for its own kind of peculiar, wayward logic. It resists demonstration or validation – we can scarcely believe in it. It seems more of the order of the *muthos*, than of the *logos*, and Plato’s account of it is certainly mythical in quality. But it is not presented as a myth. Rather Plato makes it straddle that hoary *muthos/logos* distinction by referring to it as both an *eikos muthos* (which may be translated as ‘myth resembling the truth’, or more succinctly, a ‘likely story’) and *eikos logos* (or likely account).¹

¹ Derrida, in *Khora*, writes: ‘Does such a discourse derive, then, from myth? Shall we gain access to the thought of the *khora* by continuing to place our trust in the alternative *logos/mythos*? [...] ...how are we to think that which, while going outside the regularity of the *logos*, its law, its natural or legitimate genealogy, nevertheless does not belong, *stricto sensu*, to *mythos*? Beyond the retarded or Johnny-come-lately opposition of *logos* and *mythos*, how is one to think the necessity of that which, while *giving place* to that opposition as to so many others, seems sometimes to be itself no longer subject to the law of the very thing which it *situates*? What of this *place*? It is nameable?’ 90-1. He goes on: ‘It is perhaps because its scope goes beyond or falls short of the polarity of metaphorical sense versus proper sense that the thought of the *Khōra* exceeds the polarity, no doubt analogous, of the *mythos* and the *logos*.’ 92 Badiou writes: ‘It was already difficult for Plato himself to maintain entirely the maxim that endorses the *matheme* and banishes the poem. He could not do this because he had himself explored the limits of *dianoia*, of discursive thought. When it is a question of the supreme principle, of the One or the Good, Plato must admit that we are here ‘*epekeina tes ousias*’, ‘beyond substance’, and consequently that we are beyond everything that exposes itself in the incision of the Idea. Plato must avow that the donation in thought of this supreme principle – which is the donation in thought of a Being beyond beings – does not let itself be traversed by any kind of *dianoia*. Plato must himself resort to images, like that of the sun; to metaphors, like those of ‘prestige’ or ‘power’; to myths, like the myth of Er the Pamphylian returning to the kingdom of the dead. In short, when what is at stake is the opening of thought to the principle of the thinkable, when thought

This Plato of the mythical countertextual might appear incongruous, given that earlier I had suggested that the Age of the Poets, and in particular Romanticism, the religion of the countertextual, might be considered (and have often been presented as) a belated reaction against the Platonic tradition. And indeed he should appear incongruous, because this is not the Plato we tend to think of when we think of Platonism. Rather, we are more likely to recall the Plato of the *Phaedrus* who famously privileges *logos* (or speech) over *muthos* (condemning both writing and myth as a ‘repeating without knowing’, to use Derrida’s phrase from Plato’s *Pharmacy*), thereby inaugurating a tradition of logocentrism that would have little time for the bastard reasoning of the countertextual *khora*, but that later provided an opportunity for the Romantic counter-privileging of myth. (Things are, of course, not quite that straightforward: in order to dismiss writing, distinguishing it from knowledge, Plato’s calls on the Egyptian myth of Theuth and Thamus to make his point. Derrida famously discusses the *Phaedrus* as a major contribution to ‘the general problematic of the relations between the mythemes and the philosophemes that lie at the origin of western *logos*. That is to say, of a history – or rather, of History – which has been produced in its entirety in the *philosophical* difference between *mythos* and *logos*. [Dissemination, p. 86]’ Plato, it seems, was often happy to blur this distinction. As he says in the *Gorgias*: ‘Listen, then, as story-tellers say, to a very pretty tale [*muthos*], which I dare say that you may be disposed to regard as a fable [*muthos*] only, but which, as I believe, is a true tale [*logos*], for I mean to speak

must be absorbed in the grasp of what establishes it *as* thought, we witness Plato himself submitting language to the power of poetic speech. [*Inaesthetics*, 19-20]

the truth' [see the Camb Comp to Greek Mythology, particularly p. 5; see also Dissemination pp. 74 &].)²

We might well expect Badiou, who declares the Age of Poets to be 'completed' [Manifesto, p. 71], to have reached a point of 'saturation and closure' [inaesthetics 9], and who continues to endorse the Platonic desacralisation of thought [see the chapt on poetry in infinite thought – B isn't explicit, but it's clear enough], to reject the mythical countertextual in its oblique entirety, thereby perhaps giving some much-desired definition to our post-structural, post-postmodern present. Badiou does indeed distance himself from Heidegger's late-romantic goal of stepping back into a quasi-pre-socratic order in which 'it is the poem that takes the ward of thought' [infinite thought, 92], stating that 'it is by a kind of axiomatic contestation of this' idea that he intends to 'begin the reconstruction of an *other relation*, or nonrelation, between poetry and philosophy' [ibid]. As this suggests, Badiou is happy to maintain the distance between poetry and philosophy instituted by Plato. He does so for rather different reasons, though. For Badiou, poetry must necessarily escape Plato's censure because it isn't, primarily, mimetic. On the contrary, in fact: what distinguishes poetry is that it is properly without an object, entirely foreign to the order of objects [quotations, please!]. It cannot, then, be

² In effect, then, the forced separation of *muthos* and *logos* marks the birth of both philosophy and myth as we have come to understand it (i.e., as false, as foreign to truth and reason). Badiou comments: 'Philosophy began in Greece because there alone the *matheme* allowed an interruption of the sacral exercise of validation by narrative (the *mytheme*, as Lacoue-Labarthe would say). Parmenides names the *pre*-moment – still internal to the sacred narrative and its poetic capture – of this interruption.' It is Plato, says Badiou, who stages this interruption by philosophy [infinite thought, 93]. Jean-Pierre Vernant suggests that it is out of this self-identification of philosophy that our understanding of myth emerges: 'The concept of myth that we have inherited from the Greeks belongs, by reason of its origins and history, to a tradition of thought peculiar to Western civilization in which myth is defined in terms of what is not myth, being opposed first to reality (myth is fiction) and, second, to what is rational (myth is absurd). [quoted by Starobinski]'

dismissed because it is palely imitative. In this regard, Badiou might be said to come unusually close to the age of poets, to Heidegger in particular, in stressing and valuing the deobjectifying power of poetry [on the proximity to Heidegger, see p. 98 of *Infinite Thought*]. However, unlike Heidegger, Badiou seeks to ensure the autonomy of the poem, not by privileging it over philosophy as an organ of truth, but rather by maintaining its disruptive difference from philosophy. Badiou wishes to guard the Platonic non-relation between poetry and philosophy precisely because the deobjectifying power of poetry, ensured and maintained by this very non-relation, is precisely what is so valuable to philosophy, and it is hence what leads Badiou to present poetry as a condition of philosophy.

To understand this point, however, I need to say something about Badiou's notoriously complex ontology. [That he has an ontology at all immediately announces his difference to poststructuralism: his philosophical project is premised on the necessity of prising apart once again ontology from a general theory of the subject.]

In his *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, Badiou remarks: 'That truth and totality are incompatible is without doubt the decisive – or post-Hegelian – teaching of modernity'. [*Inaesthetics*, p. 23]. And it wouldn't be incorrect to understand Badiou's philosophical project as a complex elaboration of this idea. Interestingly, this aligns Badiou with Heidegger's conviction that truth and knowledge are utterly distinct [back up]. The difference, however – and it is a significant one – is that whereas Heidegger believed that this placed truth outside of the sphere of philosophy, rendering it the countertextual

preserve of poetry, Badiou, utilising modern developments in mathematics, sees truth as something that, in general, is capable of being accounted for on a purely logical basis, even though its particular instantiations cannot be foreseen by philosophy. Badiou develops his ontology on the basis of certain insights afforded by set theory. Although it is not possible to even summarise Badiou's argument here, it should be evident that, if successful, Badiou has found a way of rejecting the modern cult of finitude, the origins of which I discussed at the beginning of this talk. The infinite is then once again a philosophically legitimate and plausible area of investigation. A consequence of this, surely, is the redundancy of the mythical countertextual which henceforth can be considered little more than a cultural phenomenon of an intellectually benighted and covertly religious age. But, in the concluding section of my paper, I'd like to suggest that this is very far from being the case.

Regarding finitude, Badiou is unequivocal: what is at stake is the possibility of our long-awaited deliverance 'from our subjection to Romanticism' [TW22]. 'Today in particular', Badiou writes, 'what essentially subsists of Romanticism is the theme of finitude'. The philosophical turn to mathematics manifests a desire 'to have done with finitude, which is the principal contemporary residue of the Romantic speculative gesture' [TW 25 – much more on why it should be abandoned on pp. 26-7].

Finitude historicises the infinite as a loss or impossibility and, in doing so, preserves it, imbuing it with an aura [tw27] of the sacred, leaving it, in Badiou's terms, 'beholden to the One' [26]. Urging us to abandon the mytheme for the matheme, Badiou argues that

‘the infinite must be submitted to the matheme’s simple and transparent deductive chains, subtracted from all jurisdiction by the One’ [27]. Mathematics, unlike language, ‘has the resources to deploy a perfectly precise conception of the infinite as indifferent multiplicity’, the result of which would be to render the infinite perfectly ‘banal’ and ‘radically deconsecrated’ [27]. What mathematics allows for, then, is a radical subtraction from specific situations, specific instantiations of being, leaving behind, in rigorous mathematical formulae, an articulation only of what is most generic to any situation [quotes], which Badiou calls ‘the void’. This idea of the void being that which is present in any situation as that which is non-present, inexistent, the most extreme point of subtraction from the situation, shapes Badiou’s philosophical system. The void is the unnameable; it cannot be figured or represented, yet it is attested to by every event (which for Badiou is a subtraction from the One, an uncovering and colonising of part of the border between the situation and the void, adding something utterly unforeseen to the situation) and every truth (which, for Badiou, should be understood as the action of committing to and remaining faithful to an event).

Does the mythical countertextual which emerged with the linguistically and conceptually-driven idea of finitude survive this turn away from the linguistic turn? To be sure, Badiou’s ontology is clearly countertextual. The mathematical articulation of an infinite multiplicity is radically non-translatable. It has a purity and emptiness that stands opposed to the figurative and sensuous realm of textuality which always remains tied too much to actual situations. Of course, in its opposing stance, the Badiouian void is also, in the manner of the Derridean *contre*, very much *with* the textual realm, enabling it. So the

phenomenal philosophical dominance of the countertextual appears to continue, but surely it can no longer be considered mythical. Indeed, might it not be possible that Badiou's philosophy marks an attempt to found a new episteme, one governed by the *logical* countertextual? All the indications would suggest so, and yet the role that Badiou reserves for poetry indicates otherwise.

In the anti-mimetic operation of the modernist poem, which manifests a 'naming without imitation par excellence' [TW 239], and which he salvages from the Age of Poets for his own philosophical ends, Badiou finds a fitting analogue to the event. Poetry of this type (and Mallarme is Badiou's favourite example) subtracts language from all instrumentalising use of it, leaving it evacuated of what we might call 'sense'. Such poetry, irreducible to any given situation, would simply be its own self-presentation. It would be a pure saying, without communication (See Hallward 197 for relevant quotes), and, as such, would, in Badiou's words, exist as 'an operation of silence'. It marks the point at which language finds its own unnameable (see Inaesthetics 21), the point at which textuality itself comes closest to inhabiting the condition of the countertextual. The mythical countertextual, then, that mythic formulation of self-impossibility, apparently continues to hold sway.