

Paper

For a New Poetics of the Site¹

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Abstract

On two very different occasions, Gilles Deleuze offered an evaluation of the philosophy of Alain Badiou as it is summed up in *Being and Event*. The first of these evaluations covers two dense pages of *What Is Philosophy?*, written in collaboration with Félix Guattari. Here, long before Deleuze and Badiou would engage in a notoriously polemical correspondence, Badiou's work is labeled a "particularly interesting undertaking," even though, after a rather idiosyncratic summary, Deleuze and Guattari move on to a rather scathing criticism, arguing that Badiou actually proposes "the return, in the guise of the multiple, to an old conception of the higher philosophy," which projects situations, states of situations, and events onto a vertical or transcendent line, no matter how "errant" or "indiscernible," instead of placing two types of multiplicity, one actual and the other virtual, one beside the other, on a single plane of immanence. Besides, they add in parenthesis, "even mathematics has had enough of set-theoreticism."² Badiou himself responded to this criticism by expressing his bafflement at the "strange" nature of Deleuze and Guattari's interpretation. "I say strange, rather than false or incorrect. I do not register any incorrections in this text, only a bizarre torsion, an impracticable vantage point that makes it impossible to understand what is at stake or what we are dealing with," Badiou writes, before addressing his reader with an open invitation: "I would be grateful to anyone who could clarify this textual fragment for me, and explain what relation it bears to *Being and Event*. This is a genuine invitation, wholly devoid of irony."³ ...

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However, there had been also another occasion, this time private, on which Deleuze seems to have responded somewhat differently to Badiou's work. As Badiou told me in an interview, Deleuze wrote to him right before the publication of *Being and Event* in order to express his appreciation for what he considered to be the major conceptual innovation of the manuscript, namely, the concept of the event-site or eventual site, *site événementiel* in French: "It was Deleuze who, very early on, even before our correspondence, at the time when *Being and Event* was about to appear, told me that the heart of my philosophy was the theory of the site of the event. It was this theory, he told me, that explained why one is not in immanence, which he regretted a lot, but neither is one in transcendence. The site is that which would diagonally cross the opposition of immanence and transcendence."⁴ It is somewhat surprising, to say the least, that this evaluation of the significance of the eventual site for Badiou's overall philosophical project does not make it into the actual note dedicated to *Being and Event* in *What Is Philosophy?* After all, did not Deleuze and Guattari also devote a long section of this book to what they call "geophilosophy," arguing for an understanding of the philosophical concept not in terms of representation of objects by subjects but rather in terms of the relation of thought to territory and the earth? As they write: "Subject and object give a poor approximation of thought. Thinking is neither a line drawn between subject and object nor a revolving of one around the other. Rather, thinking takes place in the relationship of territory and the earth."⁵ And, incidentally, did not Deleuze and Guattari quote the text "What is a Site?" by Marcel Détienné, the historian of ancient Greece, as a major point of reference for their geophilosophy?

What I would like to propose today, then, is an elaboration of the concept of the site as a possible contribution not just to geophilosophy but to a literary and poetic investigation as well. The aim is to come to an un-

derstanding of the question “What is a Site?” in dialogue with Badiou’s philosophy, both in *Being and Event* and, to a lesser extent, in the recently published follow-up, *Logics of Worlds*, which is subtitled *Being and Event, 2*.

In fact, I would like to trace three different itineraries in search of a definition of the site. Thus, before turning to Badiou’s philosophy in some detail, I will begin by sketching out a broad map of post-1968 French thought so as to situate the notion of the site at the pivot of the most important theoretical and ideological traditions in this field. This genealogical sketch will be followed by a conceptual and to some extent fairly technical exposé on the shifting uses of the site in Badiou’s two volumes. Finally, I will end by bringing this debate home, both by leading us back in the direction of literature—poetry to be precise—and by turning from Europe to the far reaches of South America, with the discussion of a poem from *Residencia en la tierra* by Pablo Neruda.

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Genealogically speaking, I would argue that the site can be located at the heart of post-1968 thought. What were, after all, the dominant trends of those years toward the end of the sixties and the early seventies, which we in the USA identify more broadly with the birth of so-called “French theory”? As Badiou suggests, in *Peut-on penser la politique? (Can Politics Be Thought?)*, the last founding moment in this tradition was the polemic between Jean-Paul Sartre and Louis Althusser, or if you prefer, between the Situationists such as Guy Debord and the psychoanalytical theory of Jacques Lacan. This is the debate between humanism and structuralism, or between humanist Marxism and structuralist Marxism. In a nice pun, Badiou describes this polemic as the conflict of the Cause against the cause: “The last debate in this matter opposed the tenants of liberty, as founding reflective transparency, to the tenants of the structure,

as prescription of a regime of causality. Sartre against Althusser: this meant, at bottom, the Cause against the cause.”⁶ Any Sartrean commitment to some ideological Cause would thus be put into crisis by the Althusserian investigation of the structures of social causality.

If we scrutinize this classical debate a bit more closely, however, even in some of the most canonical texts of the tradition such as Sartre’s *In Search of Method* or Althusser’s *For Marx*, we might very well come away with a completely unorthodox conclusion. In Althusser’s case, for instance, the investigation of the structure in actual fact is always meant to lead to moments of internal deadlock and impasse—most notably through the concepts of over- and underdetermination, which are analogous to the category of the weakest link in Lenin’s analysis of the causes behind the October Revolution. Structuralism, in other words, never really amounts to producing a flat grid or diagram from which to read off a fixed set of symbolic effects; instead, already at its height, French structuralism aimed to pinpoint how sense is produced from a kernel of nonsense, senselessness or ab-sense. As Deleuze would write most eloquently in a 1967 text, “A quoi reconnaît-on le structuralisme?” (“How Do We Recognize Structuralism?,” which was not published until 1971), among its defining features structuralism always seeks to place an empty square or an empty place (*une case vide*) at the center of the structure. Of course, this means, as you can clearly see, that all true structuralism is already a post-structuralism, if we take the latter to refer to the fact that the structure’s center is empty or absent, with an absence that nonetheless holds the structure together through various effects of displacement and condensation.⁷ A far cry, for sure, from textbook presentations about the flat scientificism of so-called structuralists—the kind of image I grew up with when I studied narratology as an undergraduate in Leuven, before coming to Penn, with Gérard Genette’s *Figures III* as the Bible under our armpits.

Now, on the other end of the spectrum, things do not necessarily draw up a much more comforting or familiar picture. Thus, even in his analysis of historical collectives or groups, in *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, Sartre repeatedly hits upon elements of what he calls the practico-inert, that is, resilient forces that are not so much foreign or external to the subject as much as they are immanent obstacles that always seem to work against the intended finality of the subject's own actions. This logic of counterfinality, in other words, always throws a wrench into the logic of the supposed freedom and transparency of the subject. We might also say that the practico-inert marks the point where structural constraints inscribe themselves at the heart of even the purest revolutionary group, splitting it from within between that part of it that is engaged in a type of "fusion" and that part that breaks up this movement with an inevitable effect of objective and institutional "inertia." Again, we are far removed from the simplistic image of *praxis* as the self-positing activity of a collective ensemble or set (Sartre's work is after all subtitled an ontology of historic sets or *ensembles*, in an unexplored mathematical sense that Badiou will pick up on), let alone as the identical subject-object of history, familiar from Western Marxism after Lukács.

It is precisely at this point that the dialectic of structure and subject reveals the site where both intersect. This is not to say that the structure, brought to the point of inner deadlock, and the subject, divided from within by the effects of counterfinality, can be integrated into a neat relation of synthesis or complementarity. To the contrary, the two mutually presuppose one another only at the point of their inner breakdown.

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Thus, the key development for the theory of the event as it takes shape in the late sixties in France as elsewhere can be said to lie in

the notion that the impasse of the structure becomes visible only thanks to the retroactive effect of a subjective intervention.

This is precisely how Badiou sums up the entire trajectory of his major work, *Being and Event*: "The impasse of being, which causes the quantitative excess of the state to err without measure, is in truth the pass of the Subject."⁸ We now understand this better, given our genealogical itinerary, just as it becomes easier to understand the importance of the fact that Badiou describes himself as having been marked by the influence of three "masters" or "teachers" (*maîtres*): Sartre, Althusser, and Lacan.

Finally, the reason why the event-site is the most original conceptual creation of *Being and Event* should have become clearer as well. It is precisely because an event is always anchored in a specific situation by way of its symptomatic site that it is neither transcendent (it is not "beyond" the situation at hand) nor immanent (it is not "already" lying dormant, virtually or potentially, within the situation as we know it). Badiou thus describes the site in highly metaphorical language—we are after all moving in the direction of a poetics—as laying *aux bords du vide*, or on the edges of the void. More specifically, he defines the site as follows: "I will term *evental site* an entirely abnormal multiple: that is, a multiple such that none of its elements are presented in the situation," and he goes on to explain his own use of such highly poetic language:

It becomes clearer why an evental site can be said to be "on the edge of the void" when we remember that from the perspective of the situation this multiple is made up exclusively of non-presented multiples. Just "beneath" this multiple—if we consider the multiples from which it is composed—there is *nothing*, because none of its terms are themselves counted-as-one. A site is therefore the *minimal* effect of structure which can be conceived; it is such that it belongs to the situation, whilst what belongs to it in turn does not.⁹

Before turning to an example, I would like to insist on the crucial importance of the notion of the site for the entire conceptual

edifice of *Being and Event*. Without this notion, in fact, another criticism or objection, raised against Badiou's philosophy far more frequently than Deleuze's charge, would hold true, that is, the objection not so much of his presenting a transcendent or higher philosophy, but of falling in a rigid or even dogmatic, undialectical dichotomy of pure being, on the one hand, and the event as pure miracle, on the other.

The site, by locating an event within a minimal structural deadlock in the order of representation, is precisely that which diagonally crosses out this dualism, all the while articulating the structure of *what is* (being) with *what happens* (event), through the retroactive intervention of a subject.

As Badiou writes in the short and pivotal "Meditation Seventeen: The Matheme of the Event," the site is what makes that an event is an event *for* a given situation: "The event is attached, in its very definition, to the places, to the point, in which the historicity of the situation is concentrated. Every event has a site which can be singularized in a historical situation."¹⁰ This does not mean that the existence of a site is a sufficient condition for an event to occur. "This site is only ever a *condition of being* for the event," Badiou adds: "It is always possible that no event actually occur. Strictly speaking, a site is only 'evental' insofar as it is retroactively qualified as such by the occurrence of an event."¹¹

One of the principal effects of the concept of the evental site in *Being and Event*, in my eyes at least, thus consists in prohibiting any interpretation of the event in the miraculous or decisionistic terms of pure self-belonging. Admittedly, the second volume of *Being and Event*, *Logics of Worlds*, might be confusing in this regard, insofar as it deploys a very different understanding of the site, which is not to be confused with the *evental site* in the original volume of *Being and Event*. What the recent book calls "site," in fact, is once again closer, in terms of self-referentiality, to an understanding of the event as an autonomous,

pure, or even miraculous occurrence, which is how the event in the earlier volume is often read once it is cut off of the "evental site" as its anchoring in the situation at hand. "Site" in *Logics of Worlds* thus refers to a moment where an entity of a given world makes its very being appear within its own regime of appearing:

Take any world whatsoever. *A multiple which is an object of this world—whose elements are indexed on the transcendental of the world—is a "site" if it happens to count itself in the referential field of its own indexing.* Or: a site is a multiple which happens to behave in the world in the same way with regard to itself as it does with regard to its elements, so that it is the ontological support of its own appearance. Even if the idea is still obscure, its content is plain: a site supports the possible of a singularity, because it summons its being in the appearing of its own multiple composition. It makes itself, in the world, the being-there of its own being.¹²

One of the most important defining features of the "site" as defined in *Logics of Worlds*, therefore, is its self-referentiality or reflexivity: "A site is a reflexive multiplicity, which belongs to itself and thereby transgresses the laws of being."¹³ This transgressive or subversive quality of self-referentiality, though, would seem to be precisely the feature that assimilates the "site" most closely to the understanding of the "event" in *Being and Event*, whereas "evental site" in this older work has very much the function of puncturing the autonomy of the event by tying it down to the point where the situation's historicity is concentrated in a symptomatic fashion.

Could we not say, then, that from "evental site" in *Being and Event* to "site" in *Logics of Worlds*, the theory of the event loses precisely the historical anchorage provided by the earlier concept? Not quite, but to understand this shift we would have to turn to another concept, that of the in-existent, which only seems to be new while in actual fact it is one of the many concepts in *Logics of Worlds* that harken back to Badiou's *Theory of the Subject*. Thus, even in *Logics of Worlds*, an event is obviously tied to the situation or "world" for which it is an event, but now the nodal point where this tying-together of world and event

occurs is depicted as the “inexistent” proper to this world. In fact, an event is only an event properly speaking, that is, a strong singularity, if it gives maximal existence to that which previously was inexistent: “The strong singularity can thus be recognized by the fact that its consequence in the world is to make exist within it the proper inexistent of the object-site.”¹⁴

The shift from “evental site” to “site” or even “event-site,” in other words, may very well be one of those places where the two volumes of *Being and Event* and *Logics of Worlds* present problems of compatibility. This is something Badiou himself admits: “I have not taken care to guarantee at every point a continuity between the two projects,” he writes in the Preface to *Logics of Worlds*: “Problems of connection and continuity do remain, namely, between ‘generic procedure’ and ‘intra-worldly consequences of the existence of the inexistent.’ I leave them for another time, or for others to solve.”¹⁵

Rather than continuing a strictly technical debate, however, I would like to draw your attention to a missing chapter, or a meditation that was originally scheduled to become part of *Being and Event*, even though in the end it was published only in the newsletter *Le Perroquet* of Badiou’s militant group Organisation Politique. This “missing meditation,” so to speak, is titled “The Factory as Event-Site,” and it will appear in a collection of *Political Writings* to be published by Columbia University Press. In it, Badiou makes the following bold claim: “The factory is, today, the event-site par excellence,” a claim whose apparent orthodoxy allows him to conclude by affirming: “This is why we can still legitimately call ourselves Marxist.”¹⁶

Now, it would not be difficult to speculate as to why Badiou decided to omit this Meditation from the published version of *Being and Event*—even though he was not averse to its publication altogether. One reason might be that there were lingering doubts with regard to the orthodoxy of the pro-

claimed continuity of Marxism and its legitimacy today. Another, more intriguing reason might be related to the difficult position that the inclusion of this particular meditation in *Being and Event* would have created for Badiou as a political activist, as opposed to his role as a philosopher more strictly speaking. Indeed, many of you no doubt know that one of the main principles behind Badiou’s proposal for a *metapolitics*, as opposed to yet another version of traditional *political philosophy*, lies in the notion that philosophy itself does not produce any truths, whether political or otherwise. If Badiou the philosopher were to adopt a prescriptive register in order to tell his fellow militants what is to be done, however, he could very well end up having troubles with his own organization.

Some of these doubts survive even the official reason, which Badiou recently gave me for excluding the meditation on the factory from *Being and Event*, namely, the fact that originally he had planned to add concrete historical meditations to each section of the book, dealing with each one of the four truth procedures that are art, science, love, and politics. “The Factory as Event-Site” was meant to be one such illustrative meditation. But then the book would have ended up being nearly unmanageable, with four times as many meditations than the current number of thirty-seven!

In the end, though, I am more interested in the quasi-poetic effects of the exclusion of the meditation on the factory from the final version of *Being and Event* than in the reasons behind its omission per se. Indeed, it is almost as if this exclusion were to be read as a performative instantiation—the meditation on the site becoming itself a site for the situation called *Being and Event*. There is a play of absence and presence at work in this omission, a play of impresentation and presentation, which is not unlike the effects of the metaphorical constellation that talks of multiples “on the edge of the void,” or of the “errancy” and “phantom-like” nature of the

void, and of nonbeing within being. This is, after all, another defining feature of the “site” according to *Logics of Worlds* as well: “Because it carries out a transitory cancellation of the gap between being and being-there, a site is the instantaneous revelation of the void that haunts multiplicities.”¹⁷

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It should not come as a surprise, therefore, to find a similar grammar of haunting impresentation at work in poetry itself, and it is even less surprising in the case of meta-poetry, such as Pablo Neruda’s “Arte poética” written around 1929 and included in *Residencia en la tierra*. In fact, this poem opens with what I consider to be one of the most striking grammatical and metaphorical images for the site, here not so much situated “on the edge of the void” so much as “between shadow and space,” *entre sombra y espacio*. Anyone would of course be hard pressed to locate this space or nonplace. To do so would require the gesture of a minimal separation, if not a cut: the introduction of a distance between shadow and the place or space on which this shadow casts itself. (In another poem from *Residencia en la tierra*, “Galope muerto,” Neruda offers an equivalent image for time: *entre la noche y el tiempo*, “between night and time.”)

By definition, this poem written in the tradition of an “ars poética,” demands a type of reading which I have sometimes accused Badiou of performing, namely, a reading whereby the poem ends up presenting the theory of what is a poem, what is an event, or what is a site, a subject, and so on—in this case, a poetic event, a poetic subject, and a poetic site.

In *Residencia en la tierra*, such a reading can follow the guideposts provided above all by pure syntax. We should thus be on the lookout for the alternation between *what there is*, or *what appears* (*Hay...*, including in the phonetically indistinguishable *ay*, “alas,” which adds a note of anguish, lament, or loss

to the appearing) and *what happens*, including on the level of subjectivization, as the effect of an event-like exception, usually marked by a “but” (*pero, sin embargo, or ahora bien*):

Arte poética

Entre sombra y espacio, entre guarniciones y doncellas,
dotado de corazón singular y sueños funestos,
precipitadamente pálido, marchito en la frente,
y con luto de viudo furioso por cada día de vida,
ay, para cada agua invisible que bebo soñolientamente,
y de todo sonido que acojo temblando,
tengo la misma sed ausente y la misma fiebre fría,
un oído que nace, una angustia indirecta,
como si llegaran ladrones o fantasmas,
y en una cáscara de extensión fija y profunda,
como un camarero humillado, como una campana un
poco ronca,
como un espejo viejo, como un olor de casa sola,
en la que los huéspedes entran de noche
perdidamente ebrios,
y hay un olor de ropa tirada al suelo,
y una ausencia de flores,
posiblemente de otro modo aún menos melancólico,
pero, la verdad, de pronto, el viento
que azota mi pecho,
las noches de substancia infinita caídas
en mi dormitorio,
el ruido de un día que arde con sacrificio,
me piden lo profético que hay en mí, con melancolía,
y un golpe de objetos que llaman sin ser respondidos
hay, y un movimiento sin tregua, y un nombre
confuso.

[Between shadow and space, between garrisons and maidens, endowed with a singular heart and mournful dreams, precipitately pale, withered the face and with the mourning of a widower furious for each day of life, alas, for each invisible water that I drink sleepily and for every sound that I grasp trembling, I have the absent thirst and the same cold fever, an ear that is born, an indirect anguish, as if thieves or ghosts were arriving, and in a shell of a fixed and profound extension, like a humiliated waiter, like a bell a bit cracked, like an old mirror, like the smell of a solitary house in which the roomers enter at night losingly drunk, and there is a smell of clothing tossed to the floor, and an absence of flowers, possibly in some other way even less melancholic, but, the truth suddenly, the wind the strikes my chest, the nights of infinite substance dropped in my bedroom, the hoise of a day that burns with sacrifice they demand what is prophetic in me, with melancholy, and a crashing of objects which call without being answered there is, and a movement without pause, and a confused name.]¹⁸

For a long time I dreamt of one day writing a “grammar of utopia,” in which these

poems by Neruda, together with classical texts from Vallejo and other Spanish American poets, would figure prominently. The task would be to define the grammar of exception by which a purely fictive extension (*como si llegaran ladrones o fantasmas*) can be added onto the existing situation (*aquello que hay*) so as all of a sudden to bring forth a truth (*pero, la verdad, de pronto*) which not only interpellates the subject (*me piden lo profético que hay en mí*, without ever being allowed to occupy the grammatical subject-position)

but also produces a new constellation of objects, that is, a new regime of appearing (*hay*) with its own ceaseless movement (*un movimiento sin tregua*), and a new but still confused name (*un nombre confuso*).

Neruda's "Arte poética" thus gives us a poetic theory of the site of poetry, that is, a metapoetic description of the very place or nonplace, between shadow and place, where the invention of metaphors and metonymies produces poetry as a previously inexistent truth.

Notes

- 1 The present text transcribes my handwritten notes for the keynote lecture at “Traversing Geographies: New Poetics of Space,” a conference organized by the Graduate Romanic Association of the University of Pennsylvania (March 22, 2008). I have kept all changes to a strict minimum—mostly just providing the missing references, without trying to omit the traces of the original oral presentation and without attempting to reconstruct the occasional improvisations. I would like to thank the conference’s organizers and the editors of the proceedings for their generosity and patience.
- 2 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What Is Antiphilosophy?*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 152.
- 3 Alain Badiou, “One, Multiple, Multiplicities,” *Theoretical Writings*, ed. and trans. Alberto Toscano and Ray Brassier (London-New York: Continuum, 2004), 245-246 n. 3.
- 4 Bruno Bosteels, “Can Change Be Thought? A Dialogue with Alain Badiou,” *Alain Badiou: Philosophy and Its Conditions*, ed. Gabriel Riera (Albany: SUNY Press, 2005), 254.
- 5 Deleuze and Guattari, *ibid.*, 85.
- 6 Badiou, *Peut-on penser la politique?* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1985), 10.
- 7 For a more detailed discussion of structuralism and poststructuralism from the point of view of site, place, and nonplace, see my article “Nonplaces: An Anecdoted Topography of Contemporary French Theory,” *New Coordinates: Spatial Mappings, National Trajectories*, ed. Robert Davidson and Joan Ramon Resina, *diacritics* 33.3-4 (2003): 117-139.
- 8 Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (London-New York: Continuum, 2005), 429.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 17.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 178-179.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 179.
- 12 Badiou, *Logics of Worlds: Being and Event, 2*, trans. Alberto Toscano (London-New York: Continuum, 2009), 363.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 369.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 377. For Badiou’s earlier view of this concept, see “The Inexistent,” *Theory of the Subject*, trans. Bruno Bosteels (London-New York: Continuum, 2009).
- 15 Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, 39.
- 16 Badiou, “The Factory as Event-Site,” trans. Alberto Toscano and Nina Powers (unpublished manuscript). Originally, this text was published as “Lusine comme site événementiel,” *Le Perroquet: Quinzomadaire d’opinion* 62-63 (1986).
- 17 Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, 369.
- 18 Pablo Neruda, “Arte poética,” *Residencia en la tierra*, ed. Hernán Loyola (Madrid: Cátedra, 2006). I borrow the English translation from René de Costa, *The Poetry of Pablo Neruda* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 69-70.