



# LADY CHANDOS AND THE HUMANITY FUNCTION: READING THE POSTSCRIPT TO J. M. COETZEE'S *ELIZABETH COSTELLO* WITH LACAN AND BADIOU

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## ABSTRACT

Badiou has said that his entire philosophical project stems from the need to “update” the traditional philosophical categories of Truth, Being, the Infinite and the Universal in the wake of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century German mathematician Georg Cantor’s explication of transfinite set theory. In his essay, “What is Love?”, he provides an account of one of the ways in which a post-Cantorian reconfiguration of the ontological status of the category of Woman might operate. This is given in the form of a postscript subtitled “The Feminine Position and Humanity” wherein he gives Lacan’s conception of supplementary feminine jouissance “an extra turn of the screw”. This essay draws on Badiou’s reconfiguration of the philosophical category of Woman to examine the implications of another postscript, that which abruptly concludes the 2003 novel *Elizabeth Costello* by J. M. Coetzee. It reads Coetzee’s invention of the “Letter of Elizabeth, Lady Chandos” with recourse to Lacanian psychoanalytic theory and on through the ontological reconfiguration of the philosophical category of Woman demonstrated by Badiou. It argues that Coetzee assembles, through the intervention of the postscript, a situation that “makes it possible to argue”, along with Badiou, that, for the woman position, love knots together the four types of truths – Politics, Art, Science, and Love (2008, 196).

Keywords: Coetzee; Badiou; Poetry; Love

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## INTRODUCTION

J. M. Coetzee is a South African-born resident and citizen of Australia who is well-known for his literary engagement with the ethical considerations of writing about race and sexual politics. His 2003 novel, *Elizabeth Costello*, tracks its eponymous female Australian novelist's attendance at a series of prize-givings, lectures and conferences. For Coetzee, the production of this particular novel, his ninth, necessitates a confrontation with the uniquely condensed twenty-first century problem of writing otherness—here, specifically, sexual difference. To do this, Coetzee generates a unique theory of the novel through the use of realist fiction, fictionalised interviews and seminars drawn from his own real-life academic engagements, historical letters and, I argue, the structural strategies of poetic dissemination and subtraction. The combined effect of these strategies is theatrical—what is staged is an intervention against the western philosophical negation of the feminine, one that summons poetic form as an indispensable tool for managing the concomitant narrative presence of sexual difference, philosophy, and love.

Coetzee's position on the influence of Lacanian psychoanalysis on his fictional *œuvre* is well-documented. In *Doubling the Point*, he remarks that “Lacan is a seminal thinker” and that “it may be best to be Lacanian and not to bother too much about [...] where one stands in relation to the advice—Lacan's—that one can afford to speak without ‘thought’” (Coetzee 1992, 29-30). Teresa Dovey is a prominent commentator on Coetzee's novels and her book *The Novels of J. M. Coetzee: Lacanian Allegories* (1988) is to date the only full-length study of Coetzee's work that sets out to locate evidence for the visibility of a Lacanian subject in his fiction. More than this, as David Atwell writes in *J. M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing*, Dovey's intervention initiated the very possibility of a critical debate surrounding Coetzee's work (Atwell 1993, 9).

Lucy Graham, too, has located an ongoing emphasis, in a number of Coetzee's fiction and non-fiction texts, writing that “a certain psychoanalytic conception of feminine identity becomes a figure for the predicament of the modern subject whose being is profoundly marked by nothingness” (Graham 2006, 230). Other important texts linking aspects of Coetzee's *œuvre* to Lacanian thought include Coetzee's conversations with the British psychotherapist, Arabella Kurtz, on Dostoevsky and psychotherapy (Coetzee and Kurz 2010, 2015) and Jean-Michel Rabaté's 2017 essay on Coetzee and psychoanalysis which revisits

Dovey's account and proposes a reading of Coetzee's later work as more intent on traversing Derridean aporias than the Lacanian Real.

Although, as I have argued in "The Hermeneutics of Equivocation" (Hile 2012), Derrida's "The Law of Genre" and "Before the Law" are indispensable texts for working through the final "Lesson" of Elizabeth Costello, my reading of the novel's "Postscript" argues that its significance can be further appreciated with recourse to Badiou's subtle but purposeful reconfiguration of the Lacanian feminine. Lacanian psychoanalysis presents a significant stumbling block for Badiou. Although, ultimately, Lacan and Badiou are "irreducible to each other" (Hallward 2003, 114, fn2), Lacan (along with Hegel, Kant, Plato and Heidegger) is, nevertheless, one of Badiou's key interlocutors. As Kenneth Reinhard reminds us in his introduction to Badiou's year-long seminar on Lacan, "[f]or Badiou, it is not Sartre or Althusser or any other twentieth-century thinker, but *Lacan* whose challenges every contemporary philosopher worth his or her salt must confront" (Badiou 2018, xxiii).

Indeed, Badiou considers antiphilosophy, of which Lacan is a self-professed practitioner, to be immanent to philosophy to the extent that "the non-relation between antiphilosophy and philosophy ... has severe consequences for the history of philosophy itself, for it enables the rigorous drawing of new immanent lines within the philosophical heritage" (Bartlett & Clemens 2012, 188). More specifically, Lacan is for Badiou that figure which philosophy must "pass through" in order to reconfigure the categories of Being, Truth and the Infinite in the wake of mathematical innovations from Cantor, Zermelo-Fraenkel, Cohen, et al.

One of the ways in which he approaches this is by submitting the Lacanian mathematical formula that figures Woman as not-whole (uncastratable) – and renders feminine enjoyment outside speech – to the rigours of Cantor's "actually existing infinite" (Badiou 2008, 216). As he writes, "[i]f therefore the existence of a woman as not-whole means that there exists an  $x$  totally subtracted from castration, it would follow that, unsubdued by the real of language, this woman would not speak" (213).

In "The Formulas of *L'Étourdit*", Badiou observes that "Lacan is clearly touching upon the key point when he asks himself how, in the cure, to make the passage from impotence (Imaginary) to impossibility (Real)" (2017, 81). However, as the Lacanian psychoanalyst Russell Grigg identifies, Badiou is "critical of Lacan's theory of the *pas-tout* on two counts. He argues that Lacan is confused over his use of mathematics and logic and he accuses him of being 'pre-Cantorian' in his conception of the infinite" (Grigg 2005, 55). This does not mean, however, that Badiou would like to dispense with Lacan's formulas altogether. If, for some commentators, Lacan's mathemes are "amusing" and "obviously

have nothing to do with an authentic formalization” (Borch-Jacobsen 1999, 162), for Badiou, Lacan is entirely on the right track. It is in his method rather than in his madness that he is in error.

Badiou’s essay, “What is Love?”, provides an account of one of the ways in which a post-Cantorian reconfiguration of the ontological status of the category of Woman might operate. This is given in the form of a postscript subtitled “The Feminine Position and Humanity” wherein he gives Lacan’s conception of supplementary feminine jouissance “an extra turn of the screw” (Badiou 2008, 198). For Badiou, “Love is that which, splitting the humanity function from the phallic function, returns to women, within the complete range of truth procedures, the universal quantifier” (198). As Jottkandt writes, Badiou’s “Scene of the Two” serves as the theatrical space for the staging of his “stunning contribution to the philosophical dilemma of unity and difference” (2010, 78). For Badiou, “it is from the bias of love that philosophy touches upon the sexes” (1996, 37).

This essay draws on Badiou’s reconfiguration of the category of Woman to examine the implications of the postscript that abruptly concludes *Elizabeth Costello*. Coetzee’s postscript takes the form of “The Letter of Elizabeth, Lady Chandos, to Francis Bacon” and details Lady Chandos’s anxiety about her husband’s inability “to think or speak coherently about anything at all” (Coetzee 2003, 19-20). Lady Chandos’s letter can be read as supplementary to Hugo von Hofmannsthal’s “Letter of Lord Chandos to Lord Bacon”, dated 1603 but written and published as a piece of fiction in 1902. Coetzee’s decision to install the Lady Chandos letter in the form of a postscript calls attention to the existence of a generic multiple. In “Meditation Thirty-Three” of *Being and Event*, Badiou presents the symbol ♀ as the inscription for the “generic multiple”. He writes:

What stands in for an event-without-event is the super-numerary letter itself, and it is thus quite coherent that it designates nothing. Due to a predilection whose origin I will leave the reader to determine, I will choose the symbol ♀ for this inscription. This symbol will be read “generic multiple”, “generic” being the adjective retained by mathematicians to designate the indiscernible, the absolutely indeterminate, which is to say a multiple that in a given situation solely possesses properties which are more or less “common” to all the multiples of the situation. (Badiou 2005, 356)

As Norris (2011) remarks in his close reading of *Being and Event*, Badiou’s use of the supplementary letter (♀) marks the place of an “extra signifier that ‘stands in’ for whatever is unknown or unknowable – whatever is not presented in the current situation” (252). This “supposed indiscernible multiple” is marked

by Cohen as *G* (for generic) and, as Badiou describes, the application of the supplementary letter, the extra signifier, is an approximation which, being indiscernible, “cannot be named by any phrase”. For Badiou, there is nothing in the initial situation that corresponds to this extra signifier. Because ontology does not recognize the event (for ontology the event is “always disappearing”), the supernumerary letter does not stand in for the event itself but for “an event-without-event”.

The defining feature of the new multiple, then, is paradoxically its featurelessness—it is “anything whatsoever” (Badiou 2004a, 28) with regard to established knowledge. Despite the fact that the generic multiple ascribed to a particular situation has not yet been made to register linguistically in what Badiou calls the encyclopaedia—the database of accepted knowledge about a particular situation—it nevertheless registers “by way of the disturbances, tensions, and aporias which it induces rather than existing merely in a privative or negative mode” (252). If the meanings of the disturbances registered by the generic multiple at first seem opaque they won’t necessarily stay that way. As Norris explains, a subject’s fidelity to a generic truth procedure “can make room, *via* these concepts of the generic and indiscernible, for the advent of truths that as yet lie beyond the compass of achieved (or achievable) knowledge” (252).

## 1. THE POSTSCRIPT AND POETRY

Coetzee’s ninth novel, *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), is chaptered into eight “Lessons” that, broadly speaking, deal with the impossibility of representing otherness in fiction and poetry and the strategies various authors have used to negotiate this impossibility. In the first chapter, “Realism”, Coetzee sets out the conditions of the debate – “realism is premised on the idea that ideas have no autonomous existence, can exist only in things” (9). The difficulty, therefore, is already anchored in the impossibility of embodying an existence that is, in accordance with the virtuality of language, strictly unproducible. This Lesson is followed by “The Novel in Africa”, “The Lives of the Animals: The Philosophers and the Animals”, “The Lives of Animals: The Poets and the Animals”, “The Humanities in Africa”, “The Problem of Evil”, “Eros” and “At the Gate”. As I’ve discussed in a previous essay (Hile 2012), this final lesson invokes Kafka’s “Before the Law” and can be read with recourse to Badiou’s remarks on the hermeneutics of equivocation as set out in “The Formulas of *L’Étourdit*”, as well as Derrida’s essays “The Law of Genre” and “Before the Law”.

The novel concludes abruptly with the generic intervention of a Postscript in the form of “The Letter of Elizabeth, Lady Chandos, to Francis Bacon”. As already noted, this letter, detailing Lady Chandos’s anxiety about her husband’s inertia, can be read as supplementary to Hugo von Hofmannsthal’s “Letter of

Lord Chandos to Lord Bacon”. As Pippin writes in his 2018 essay “Philosophical Fiction? On J. M. Coetzee’s Elizabeth Costello”, “the Chandos letter”, as it became known, “is regarded as one of the most influential and telling documents of literary modernism [in that] it is taken as having general significance, as bearing on the form of modernist art and the unique demands on understanding that it makes” (Pippin 2018, 295). Pippin directly addresses the role of the Postscript and the epigraph that precedes it, arguing that “[s]ince they do not seem proper parts of the book, they can easily be taken as, in some sense or other, about the book as a whole” (296). For Pippin, the inclusion of the Postscript performs the familiar Coetzeean strategy of inhabiting characters from literary works by Defoe and Dostoevsky, is in keeping with Elizabeth Costello’s own inhabitation of Molly Bloom from Joyce’s *Ulysses*, and speaks to Joyce’s transposition of the *Odyssey* into an early twentieth century setting. Pippin wants to utilise the epigraph and Postscript as tools to, firstly, link back to the literary and philosophical preoccupations of the eighth lessons and, secondly, to show how reflection on these preoccupations “might lead to an initial understanding of the ‘fictional’ treatment of philosophical argument” (297). I argue that Coetzee’s instalment of the figure and voice of Lady Chandos can be read as something other than a fictional treatment of philosophy, even as it maintains preoccupations with Lacanian psychoanalytic theory and the philosophical categories of Truth, the Infinite, and the Feminine.

In what follows, I figure Coetzee’s use of the postscript as a form of poetic enjambment. I then examine Badiou’s assessment of Mallarmé’s poetic endeavour as performative of a “negation of negation” and argue that this method is enacted through Coetzee’s introduction of the figure and voice of Lady Chandos. Badiou’s understanding of Lacan’s positioning of the feminine as uncastrated and therefore speechless, and his subsequent reconfiguration of the place accorded to feminine *jouissance* in order to align it with a Cantorian “secular infinity” is traced through his essays “What is Love” and “The Subject and Infinity” (both included in *Conditions* (Badiou 2008)). I find that Coetzee’s postscript, despite its clear affinities with both Lacanian and Badiouan thought, relies on poetic techniques of subtraction and dissemination in order to occupy a neither/nor configuration with regard to psychoanalytic and philosophical thought.

Coetzee’s decision to introduce Lady Chandos into the impasse presented by Hofmannsthal performs, as Lacan would have it, a move from “impotence to impossibility”. In his introduction to Badiou’s seminar series on Lacan, Reinhard articulates this movement as one that moves from the philosophical “imaginary realism” of the love of truth to an encounter with the real, such that “philosophy loves and lingers in its own impotence” whereas impossibility embodies the real “as the impossibility of a sexual relationship” (Badiou 2018, xxxv). These two modes – “symbolic impotence” and “real impossibility” – find a correlation in

Badiou's remarks on the strategies of subtraction and dissemination evident in the poems of Mallarmé and Rimbaud.

The figure of subtraction can also be considered with regard to Badiou's assessment of Beckett's four figures of subjective destiny. As Badiou writes in *Theoretical Writings* ("On Subtraction"):

Subtraction is plural. The allegation of lack, of its effect, of its causality, masks operations all of which are irreducible to one another. These operations are four in number: the undecidable, the indiscernible, the generic, and the unnameable. Four figures delineating the cross of being when it surges forth in the trajectory as well as in the obstacle of a truth. (Badiou 2004, 109)

Although in the English translation of his essay, "Language, Thought, Poetry" (in Badiou 2004), Badiou gives equal poetic status to the strategies of Mallarmé and Rimbaud, by the time the essays contained in *Conditions* (2008) are assembled, he remarks that he must "in the constraints of our time, with its confusion and its atomism, ultimately choose Mallarme" (89).

In "Language, Thought, Poetry" (a play on the title of Heidegger's *Poetry, Language, Thought*), Badiou begins by affirming that "the poem does not consist in communication" (Badiou 2004, 233). Here, we are reminded of Mallarmé's claim, outlined in "Crise de vers" in *Divagations* – that, as Pearson writes,

There are two sorts of language: "unpolished or immediate", and "essential". The former, a kind of "universal reportage", may suffice "to narrate, to teach, even to describe", and resembles a currency in everyday use. The other is a way of "transposing a fact of nature into its vibratory near-disappearance" and of purifying it of all "proximate and concrete" reference to the world so that "the pure notion" underlying the "fact of nature" may emerge. (2010, 141)

Immediately, then, Badiou posits a link between the way language circulates as the conduit of contemporary capitalism and the ways in which it might be subtracted from circulation. He goes on to set out some characteristics of the poem as he sees them. As such, "[t]he poem contains no anecdotes, no referential object. From beginning to end, it declares its own universe." One of the primary insistences of the being of the poem is that it "might indeed be a thought without knowledge, or even this: a properly incalculable thought." The way the poem goes about eliciting this result is, as Badiou argues, "by means of two contrary operations, which I will call 'subtraction' and 'dissemination'" (2004, 236). Each of these methods dis-objectifies the object but each does so in a different way. The first, through "an excessive equivalence to other objects" (237); the second

through a subtractive operation which “forces the object to undergo the ordeal of its lack” (236).

For Badiou, Rimbaud “excels in dissemination” (237). Even though he doesn’t state it explicitly at this stage, his relegation of the poems of Rimbaud to the side of dissemination hints at the view he will come to in his later writings on the two poets in *Conditions*. In “Language, Thought, Poetry”, however, he is still enamoured of the eventual singularity of Rimbaud’s use of language:

Ah! The pollen of willows which a wing shakes!

The roses of the reeds, long since eaten away!

In response to these lines, he writes that “Nothing in these words is communicable; nothing is destined in advance. No opinion will ever coalesce around the idea that reeds bear roses, or that a poetic wing rises from language to disperse the willows’ pollen ... The poem presents itself as a thing of language, encountered – each and every time – as an event” (232). Its aim is to “dissolve the object through an infinite metaphorical distribution” (237). Thus, Rimbaud sees

very clearly a mosque instead of a factory ... Life itself, like the subject, is other and multiple; for instance, “this gentleman does not know what he is doing: he is an angel”. And this family is “a pack of dogs. (237)

Mallarmé, by contrast, proceeds by way of the deposition of the object. In “On Subtraction”, Badiou begins to set out the methods and ramifications of this procedure. Drawing on the fourth scholium of Mallarmé’s “Igitur” (“I alone – I alone – am going to know the void. You, you return to your amalgam”), Badiou writes that “Nothing can be granted existence ... without being put to the test of its subtraction.” (2008, 114) Already, at the level of punctuation, we can see subtraction and dissemination at work. “I alone” am situated, anterior to the symbolic, through the subtractive separation of the mark, whilst the amalgam proceeds tidally through the metonymical punctuation of “You, you.” In “The Depersonalization Process and the Creative Encounter,” Bettina Knapp remarks of “Igitur” that it is

an initiation into the most solitary regions of the human soul, a depersonalized area which mystics have referred to as the primordial point—where Nothingness becomes Something, the Void is transformed into the Creation. (Knapp 2017, 188)

In his *Correspondance*, Mallarmé writes, with reference to the writing of “Igitur”: “What my being ... has suffered during this long agony is unrelatable; but, fortunately, I am perfectly dead, and the most impure region where my Mind can venture is the Eternity of my Spirit” (Mallarmé 1959, 240, cited in Knapp 2017, 188). For Badiou, this trial by subtractive poetic endeavour constitutes the



“purity of the act”, one that is required in order to encounter the point at which the void of being impinges upon that which can be known of the real.

In *Conditions*, Badiou proceeds more assiduously, asserting that Mallarmé’s poetry evidences “three types of negation: vanishing, cancelling and foreclosure” (2008, 40). These, following Mallarmé, are called on to inscribe “the absence or hush” (49). Badiou sets out in full the following lines, in order to demonstrate how “vanishing” and “cancelling” are enacted by Mallarmé:

Hushed to the crushing cloud

Basalt and lava its form

Even to echoes subdued

By an ineffectual horn

What shipwreck sepulchral has bowed

(You know this, but slobber on, foam)

The mast, supreme in a crowd

Of flotsam and jetsam, though torn

Or will that which in fury defaulted

From some perdition exalted

(The vain abyss outspread)

Have stingily drowned in the swirl

Of a white hair’s trailing thread

The flank of a young Siren girl.

Badiou asserts that the poem begins with “an attestation of difference” and proceeds through the naming of a name that obliterates knowledge of itself via the trace (here, the “trailing thread” of foam left by the shipwreck and the Siren’s disappearance into the waves). For Badiou, the thread of foam “supplements the nudity of place” and ‘ship’ and ‘siren’ become two vanishing terms” (51).

The point, for Badiou, *pace* Mallarmé, is not only that the double vanishing act of “ship” and “siren” signals the undecidability of the event but that “[t]he

introduction of the siren in fact presumes a second negation that is not of the same type as the first” (52). In an article on Pier Paolo Pasolini, Badiou defines his conception of negation as being split in two. The first negation constitutes a destruction in the sense that an innovation or novelty must first break with the accepted state of the situation. But for a novelty to be fully realised, this initial negation must be accompanied by a second affirmative negation. As he writes, “a creation or a novelty must be defined paradoxically as an affirmative part of negation” (“Destruction, Negation, Subtraction”, 2007). Badiou names this second, affirmative negation subtraction.

As a philosopher, “in the constraints of our time, with its confusion and its atomism” Badiou “cannot hesitate” in deciding for Mallarmé (2008, 88). In a 2010 interview with Olivier Zahm, he elaborates on the reasons for his preference:

I think there are two Mallarmés—there’s the one who was drawn to negativity, criticism, subtraction, and even death; and there’s the fading-away side of Mallarmé. The poem creating its own nothingness, its own finality. [...] The other Mallarmé is about the appearance of the idea. At the end of his poem, *Coup de dés* [Throw of the dice], nothing has taken place, except perhaps at the altitude of a constellation. That’s the other Mallarmé. He was able to create a scintillating object, out of the void, which embodied the future. I think that at the time of the avant-garde, that first Mallarmé, the savant of the void, if I may call him that—the negative one—was the most important. I think that now we must also lean on the second Mallarmé, the one who did not despair that his work with the negative would actually bring about an affirmation of a new kind. (Badiou 2010, no page)

The Irish literary critic, Vivian Mercer, famously wrote of Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* that it was a play wherein “nothing happens, twice” (1994, 29). This method of affirmative negation, evidenced in the work of Mallarmé and Beckett, can be read as being enacted by Coetzee’s provision of the “Letter of Elizabeth, Lady Chandos, to Francis Bacon” as an addendum to Hofmannsthal’s “Letter of Lord Chandos to Lord Bacon (1902)”. However, the addition of the Lady Chandos “answer song”, far from providing a solution to Lord Chandos’ plight, only seems to reinforce and amplify it:

Presences of the Infinite he calls us, and says we make him shudder; and indeed I have felt those shudders, in the throes of my raptures I have felt them, so much that whether they were his or were mine I could no longer say. (Coetzee 2003, 230)

Lady Chandos’ letter, then, can be read, in part, as an act of poetic mimesis. If mimesis as a certain mode of poetry (rather than poetry itself) is dismissed

from the *polis* as an obstacle to truth by philosophers from Plato to Badiou, for Coetzee it still offers a method for re-presenting the structural difficulties encountered by the novel when faced with the philosophical categories of Truth, Being, the Infinite and the Universal.

## 2. THE POSTSCRIPT AND PHILOSOPHY

In the final pages of his essay, “What is Love”, Badiou summarises his thesis on the disjunctive formula of love – “man’s knowledge is made of judgements ordered around the nothing of the Two. And woman’s knowledge orders them around *nothing but the two*” (2008, 194). Love is figured as “that scene in which a truth proceeds ... through a conflict of knowledges for which there can be no compensation” (194). Further, because love is that truth procedure through which the real of the sexual disjunction is activated but not ever completely presented (193) – to the extent that “woman and man only ever exist in the field of love” (196) – such knowledge that is gathered will be organised by the impossibility of two subjects being able to “occupy both positions at the same time and in the same respect.” Thus, for Badiou, any knowledge that can be ascertained through the enquiries of the Two in love must necessarily be veridical rather than true. As he writes, “I shall object to the notion that it is possible, in love, for each of the sexes to learn anything *about the other* [...] To love well is to understand poorly” (193-5).

Badiou chooses to end “What is Love” with a postscript that he labels “The Feminine Position and Humanity”. He writes, “I might have concluded with these words. But I shall add a postscript to return to where I left off” (195). If we think, along with Mulhall, of Coetzee’s postscript as supplementary to the text, then we begin to think of Lacan’s conception of supplementary jouissance. Importantly, however, where for Lacan supplementary jouissance circumscribes the domain of the feminine, for Badiou, the supplementary is the arena of the event.

Although Badiou takes love to be one of the truth procedures, it differs markedly from those pertaining to science, art, or politics in that “love does not think itself” (183). In summary:

1. *There are two positions of the experience of love* [...]
2. *The two positions are totally disjunct* [...]
3. *There is no third position.* (183)

As Badiou writes regarding his remarks on disjunction:

The idea of a third position engages the function of the imaginary: this involves the angel. The discussion about the sex of angels is crucial insofar as what is at issue in it is the *announcement of the disjunction*.

However, this can only be done from the vantage point of experience, or of the situation. What makes it possible here for me, then, to announce this disjunction ... is the requirement that the situation, which is not adequate in itself, is supplemented. (184-5)

Badiou characterizes this supplement as “a singular event. This event is what initiates the amorous procedure, and we might agree to call it an *encounter*” (184). Both Badiou and Coetzee can be said to have recourse to the form of the postscript in their attempts to account for the sexual disjunction. We can think of Coetzee’s decision to install Lord Bacon/Francis Bacon as interlocutors of the postscript as a signal that what is taking place here is a form of scientific, artistic, amorous and political experiment with Lord and Lady Chandos as its subjects. What happens to love, to philosophy, to art, to politics in the wake of the mathematically reconfigured position of the infinite? If literature has historically relied on a triangular configuration in order to generate narrative, a third wheel to disrupt the dyadic paradise of love, what happens to the novel if we subtract one of its key historical markers?

In the “Letter of Elizabeth, Lady Chandos”, Coetzee’s configuration seems close to re-enacting the very triangulation of desire of which he was so critical in his 1980 essay “Triangular Structures of Desire in Advertising” and, in figuring an emptied, desiring subject, comes closer to replicating a Lacanian or psychoanalytic conception of the subject. It is possible to read in Coetzee’s critique of triangular desire a blueprint for the predicament faced by Lord Chandos and Lady Elizabeth Chandos. The characters with which Coetzee populates the postscript seem unwilling or unable to move beyond their dependence on the triangular structure. Lady Chandos looks to Francis Bacon to save them from the “rats and dogs and beetles crawling through me day and night, drowning and gasping, scratching at me, tugging me, urging me deeper and deeper into revelation” (Coetzee 2003, 229). What is missing, she seems to be saying, what might save them from drowning in their “separate fates”, is an empirical study into their situation, conducted by “you, who are known above all men to select your words and set them in place and build your judgements as a mason builds a wall with bricks” (230). Yet, for Badiou, love is not that which lacks only knowledge for its realisation – “love does not compensate for anything” (2008, 182). This is one of the notable features of Coetzee’s postscript. There is no easily transmissible reading of its structure. Viewed from one angle it is Lacanian, from another it can be read as decidedly Badiouan. Where the novelist is intent on subsisting amidst philosophy and antiphilosophy, Badiou’s project is intent on passing through. The traversal of Lacanian antiphilosophy is not, for Badiou, a matter of learning as such but an act of subjective transformation. As Reinhard explains:

For Badiou, the essential philosophical ideas are the subject, truth, and being, and to “traverse” Lacan requires unflagging strength and the

courage to rise to the real challenge that Lacan poses to these fundamental philosophical topics. Both Badiou and Lacan regard the subject not as the foundation of consciousness, but as something occasional and evanescent. But whereas for Lacan the subject is a vanishing point, merely a disturbance of the symbolic order represented by the petrification of one signifier in relation to the movement of the other signifiers, for Badiou the subject is a “rare” but real achievement, the local instantiation of a truth process, with which an individual may affiliate and thereby attain a kind of nonindividual immortality as a subject. (Badiou 2018, xxv-vi)

In the postscript to “What is Love”, Badiou claims to have given Lacan’s formulae of sexuation “a turn of the screw” and, in so doing, to have removed Lacan’s positioning of the feminine from what Badiou thinks of as its classical Hegelian assignation. For Badiou, Lacan’s formulae, with the phallic function ascribed to the male side, perform a negation of the feminine position:

He [Lacan] ascribed the universal quantifier to man (for every man), and defined woman through a combination of the existential and negation, which led him to say that woman is not-whole.” (Badiou 2008, 198)

He goes on to explicitly link Lacan’s formulae to Hegel, an important figure in Badiou’s philosophical universe. As Bosteels writes, “Of all canonical philosophers aside from Plato, Hegel is without a doubt Badiou’s most constant interlocutor” (Bosteels 2010, 137). Badiou himself has remarked, “You could almost say that my entire enterprise is one giant confrontation with the dialectic” (cited in Bosteels 2010, 138). In “What is Love”, Badiou writes of Lacan’s positioning of the feminine that it

is in many respects classical. Hegel, proclaiming woman the irony of the community, effectively indicated this effect at the border of the existential by which a woman makes holes in the whole that men strive to consolidate. (Badiou 2008, 198)

Lacan has his own disputes with Hegel and it is important to keep in mind that Badiou views Lacanian antiphilosophy as being in a “non-relation” to philosophy. Nevertheless, from Badiou’s perspective, it is through the process of negation called for by the thesis-antithesis-synthesis formation of the Hegelian dialectic that woman is sutured to the infinite of nature and excluded. In this, the philosopher seems to be in accordance with feminist objections to the perceived totalizing propensities of the dialectic. But, for Badiou, Lacan’s positioning of the feminine “occurs as a strict effect of exercising the [infinity] function” whereas, from the perspective of his own philosophy, “*the humanity function  $H(x)$  does not coincide with the [infinity]( $x$ ) function.*” For Badiou, “Love is that which, splitting the humanity function from the phallic function, returns to

women, within the complete range of truth procedures, the universal quantifier” (198).

In “The Subject and Infinity”, Badiou writes that Lacan struggles to formulate the infinite as “the ultimate condition of the universality of castration” (2008, 217). The problem as he sees it is that Lacan “squarely held the actual infinite to be an imaginary object” (219). In *Theoretical Writings*, he nominates this as Lacan’s primary equivocation, citing Lacan’s assertion from *Or Worse* that Cantor’s non-denumerable transfinite Cardinals represent “an object which I would have to characterize as mythic” (cited in Badiou 2004, 129). For Badiou, “it is not possible to proceed very far in drawing the consequences of the infinity of the true without insisting that non-denumerable Cardinals are real, not mythic” (129). Because, for Badiou’s materialist dialectics, infinities exist, this means that the Lacanian feminine is precluded from achieving the “negation of negation” that is the cultural achievement of Hegelian recognition. As Hallward notes:

Building on Lacan’s inspiration and Beckett’s example, Badiou’s ethical maxim is simply “Keep going!” or “Continue!” regardless of the circumstances or cost: “Every ethics centers on the negation of the negation, on not denying [the event],” that is, on “holding to the present” of its consequences (TA, 14.5.97). But whatever your truth, Badiou adds, one should not go all the way. One should continue in such a way as to be able to continue to continue.” (2003, 265)

In this, Badiou and Coetzee seem to be aligned, each of them set on providing the conditions for the continuance of their respective forms. Indeed, in an essay on Jacques Rancière, Badiou argues that the artistic discipline can be analogous of the political discipline and that “[t]he circumstantial failures of history should not invoke melancholy but, rather, should activate the deployment of the idea in the tension of its future, a future to be persevered for a long time” (2009, 53). In “Philosophy and Psychoanalysis”, Badiou hinges this principle on an aversion to the “speculative parricide” of his Platonic “criminal heritage”. What deters him is “no doubt the fact that I object to the sermon of today announcing philosophy’s end, that I modestly claim to take a single step forward, and thus as the commonplace of today’s thought is parricide, it is filial respect that forms a figure of singularity” (2008, 201). In keeping with this, Badiou’s reworking of Lacan constitutes, not an abolition, but an inquiry –“From the Eden of thought that Lacan opened up for us we shall not be banished. But we shall also, as has been attempted here, inquire into its marvel” (227).

In reworking Lacan’s formulas, Badiou argues for a “secularisation of the infinite” that forms the basis of his philosophical enterprise and can be drawn on to enable an affirmative reading of the “Letter of Elizabeth, Lady Chandos”, one which draws the “dumb” girl of Lacanian enjoyment into the arena of speech.

However, this does not mean that Coetzee's postscript can be read as performative of Badiou's philosophy. We might, rather, think of Badiou's emphasis on the four truth procedures of Love, Politics, Art and Science as precluding such a reading. As Bosteels notes, "[t]he practice of philosophy ... amounts to thinking the truths of one's time, truths that have already occurred before the arrival of the philosopher on the scene of the event" (2010, 143).

Badiou insists that it is only through fidelity to one of the four truth procedures of Art, Love, Science or Politics that an individual might move beyond its status as human to become a true subject. Philosophy, however, as far as Badiou is concerned, is not authorized to pronounce on the nature of the truths encountered through engagement with the four procedures. As Clemens argues in "Platonic Meditations", "for Badiou philosophy *itself* is not involved in the invention and production of such possibilities (this is the realm of the four generic conditions)" (2011, 206, fn16). What philosophy must strive for is what Badiou calls "compossibility", that is, it must relentlessly circulate amongst its four generic conditions without attempting to master them or prescribe the nature of their scientific testings and outcomes. Indeed, what philosophy hopes to gain from the procedures is precisely the reverse of mastery and Badiou can be almost humorous on this score: "Poem, matheme, politics and love at once condition and insult philosophy. Condition and insult: that's the way it is" (2004, 101).

As Pluth affirms, "philosophy itself does not lead us to any truths of its own. It relies on, is parasitic upon, the truths that are developed in particular situations" (2010, 10). And as Clemens, in "Platonic Meditations" clarifies, "[f]or Badiou, philosophy has no *object*; it is simply a particular torsion of an active thought—an *act* of philosophy—which involves the grasping of new possibilities of existence in the course of their production" (2011, 206). Philosophy cannot reveal truths, therefore, or even encounter them. But what it can do is apprehend the new possibilities that fidelities to these impossible contingencies can produce. Its function, however, is not merely observational. Pluth warns that, "without a certain type of philosophy the pursuit of truths in politics, art, science, or love may wither away, for a lack of advocacy and a lack of justification" (2010, 10). As for Badiou, "It is likely the case that he would describe his own philosophy as "veridical" rather than true ..." (11).

A clear example of Badiou's conception of truth can be found in his assessment of psychoanalysis: "To speak brutally, I do not think that analysis is an interpretation, because it is regulated not by sense, but by truth. This is certainly not an uncovering of truth, of which we know that it is vain to think it could be uncovered, *because it is generic*." (Badiou 2008, 208, my italics). This emphasis on the generic makes sense of Bartlett & Clemens' claim that "the method of antiphilosophy, at least in its Lacanian version, is a *subtractive* one. In other words, it builds its discourse on that which, for its rival, is impossible to say and

impossible to know. In other words, analytic discourse constructs itself as the truth of the other or the thought of the real.” (2012, 181-82)

If Coetzee’s postscript can be thought of as performative of Badiou’s philosophy at all, it is in the sense that it introduces the woman position caused to exist in the field of love as that which knots “the four types of truths” together (Badiou 2008b, 196). The introduction of the voice of Lady Chandos binds together the four conditions of Art, Science, Politics and Love, respectively conjured in the construction of a site for literary experimentation that draws on poetic techniques of enjambment and subtraction; in the adoption of Lord Francis Bacon’s method of experimentation; in the inclusion of the historically negated position of the feminine; and in the summoning of the Scene of the Two.

### 3. CONCLUSION

In *Reading Coetzee*, MacFarlane argues that Coetzee’s novels since 2003 can be read as postscripts to his earlier works and that “every act of writing ... is an act of sacrifice” (MacFarlane 2013, 13). For Mulhall, “the first lesson of Elizabeth Costello is that all its later lessons ... must be understood as [being] framed by an overarching interest in the literary conjunction of realism and modernism in the genre of the novel” (2009, 140). For Elizabeth Costello, as for Coetzee, this partly involves a series of inquiries that tests the ethical limits of fiction in what is, as Attridge points out, far from “a celebration of the novelist’s art” (2004, 203). For Mulhall, it is “a novel that neither denies nor asserts that it is a novel” (2009, 231).

This “neither/nor” conception of *Elizabeth Costello* provides a formal instruction as to how one might read the *non-sequitur* of the postscript that appears after “Lesson 8: At the Gate”. As Jöttkandt writes in her essay on Badiou’s philosophical conception of Love, “the Two of love is not the product of an addition ... [It] neither ‘counts as one,’ nor as ‘the sum of one plus one.’ It is, rather, the result of a subtractive operation, where what is subtracted from the two positions of experience is precisely that which brought them, albeit in an impossibly separated way, together” (Jöttkandt 2010, 96). In two essays on Badiou and the effect of woman “with/in” the universal, Louise Burchill (2020) draws on an assertion made by Badiou in 2011 to suggest that this “neither/nor” configuration logically extends to Badiou’s entire philosophical enterprise, including, inevitably, his account of the truth procedures of science, politics and art. In her 2018 essay on Beckett and Badiou, Jöttkandt addresses a more recent contention made by Badiou in his paper “Figures of Femininity in the Contemporary World” to the effect that sexuation (as defined within his philosophical parameters) may be an “inevitable” feature of philosophical and symbolic thought. For Jöttkandt, “this



tractability should not really surprise us, given the centrality of the idea of change in his philosophical project” (2018, 1189).

Burchill’s earlier 2018 essay, “Woman’s Adventures With/in the Universal”, also registers this shift in Badiou’s thinking, attesting that he “unhesitatingly asserts in this paper [“Figures of Femininity ...”] and subsequently elsewhere—that women’s full participation in art, science, politics and love, as well as philosophy, cannot fail to open these fields to “completely new possibilities”” (Burchill 2018, 121). For Burchill, this turn in Badiou’s account of the feminine borders on “a recognition of ‘sexed universals”” (106) which she explores through a comparison of differing accounts of sexual difference in Badiou and Irigaray in “Life-Giving Sex Versus Mere Animal Existence: Irigaray’s and Badiou’s Paradoxically Chiasmatic Conceptions of “Woman” and Sexual Pleasure” (2020). As Hallward points out in *Badiou: A Subject to Truth* (2003), Badiou counts Irigaray as an antiphilosopher (along with Lacan) and, in the early twenty-first century at least, was, despite considerable affinities, “diametrically opposed to Irigaray’s conception of love and sexual difference on every point” (189). Where “Irigaray looks for a specifically legal codification of the ultimately natural (if not mysterious) sexual differences, Badiou insists on the radically axiomatic status of sexual differentiation as an essentially artificial and illegal process: “The two sexes differ, radically, but there is exactly nothing of substance in this difference”” (190). Burchill provides a thorough critique of Hallward’s interpretation of Irigaray’s (mis)perceived biological reductionism, invoking the “core psychoanalytic postulate” (163) of the “structural inflexions of the mother-child relationship” which “depend on whether the child is of the same sex, or not, as the mother [...] – ‘a girl does not form a dyad with the mother but a real duality”” (163). For Burchill, the differences between Irigaray and Badiou are moderated by their agreement on the irreducibility of the sexual disjunction (160). She argues that the 2011 shift in Badiou’s thinking on the possibility of a sexuated symbolic and philosophical order has the effect of bringing “his and Irigaray’s diametrical oppositions on the point of love/desire” into an

intricately convoluted, differentially staggered, and, all in all, paradoxical complementarity. Whence, from their own perspectives, Badiou’s and Irigaray’s respective conceptions can indeed be seen to constitute a chiasmatic masculine-feminine take on the philosophy of sexual difference. (172)

Burchill recalls Lacan’s assertion of philosophy’s foreclosure of sexual difference “linked as this is to the unsymbolizable ‘thing,’ or maternal body” to suppose that Irigaray’s insistence on “the necessity of acknowledging the maternal body indicates, at the very least that the recognition of a sexually differential relation to the universal (as now hailed equally by Badiou) must, in all logic, lead

not only to new forms of symbolic creation but equally to new configurations of life-giving desire” (174).

Whether or not Badiou would concur with Burchill and Jöttkandt’s accounts of these developments, they appear intriguingly and demonstrably at work in Coetzee’s *Elizabeth Costello*. In “At the Gate”, Costello arrives at an impasse that would appear to signal, in the Hegelian sense, the novel at the end of history. Like Lacan, Coetzee turns to poetry in order to disrupt the negation of the feminine perceived to be at work in the dialectic. The deployment of the postscript at once signals the end of the novel and, in its disjunctive structure and the construction of a “scene of the Two” through the installation of the voice of Lady Chandos, provides one way of thinking about how the novel as a literary form might continue.

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