‘LOVE WILL SET YOU FREE’: ROMEO AND JULIET AND BADIOU

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Abstract: This essay consists of a reading of Shakespeare’s tragedy, Romeo and Juliet, using French philosopher Alain Badiou’s ‘Theory of the Subject’ as a framework, in order to assess the practicality of his theory of emancipation. Badiou asserts that human beings are not born into a natural subjectivity, but rather, may encounter an event in the domain of love, politics, science or art which, by rupturing the stability of their previous situation, enables them to re-construct themselves as emancipated subjects. The focus on the condition of love entails an examination of the actions undertaken and decisions made by Romeo and Juliet during the construction of their subjectivity, as well as a general critique of Alain Badiou’s controversial ‘ethics of the truth’. This discussion also incorporates an examination of wider philosophical and psychoanalytical theories on love which contradict and complement Alain Badiou’s theory, in order to ascertain his position relative to theorists and philosophers of the past and present. An analysis of Badiou’s more polemical writings is also provided through which an attempt is made to form a judgement on the twenty-first century’s notion of revolutionary love and the potential for revolutionary change.

Keywords: Badiou, Romeo and Juliet, Philosophy of Love, Difference, Subjectivity, Truth.

Badiou’s call for the re-invention of love, ‘The world is full of developments and love must also be something that innovates’ (Badiou 2012, 11), is a stirring response to what he considers a long standing attack on love from dominant ideologies, namely the patriarchal state, religion and philosophy. As one of the four ‘conditions’, love, for Alain Badiou, involves a chance encounter between two individuals, an ‘event’ in essence to which individuals must pledge fidelity in order to construct for themselves subjectivity and a new ‘truth’ in the process of re-constructing themselves on the basis of their difference. While philosophy has a well-established history in relation to discourses on the concept of love, Badiou’s treatises on love, as a return to Plato, differ significantly from that of his contemporaries, Barthes, Derrida, Lacan and Althusser, with the ‘Subject’, ‘Being’ and ‘Truth’ once again made central to a philosophical discussion on the issue. For Badiou, love as a truth procedure can and should be a site for a revolutionary awakening of the two subjects in love, provided this event engenders within the individuals the realisation that their encounter is a rare opportunity to achieve emancipation and reconfigure the world around them.

Badiou asserts that ‘without love stories, without the struggle to free love from the constraints of family, the theatre does not add up to much’ (2012, 88). Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet is a play
then that meets Badiou’s expectations regarding revolutionary theatre, and indeed revolutionary love, in its engagement with the idea of a ‘star-crossed’ love (Romeo and Juliet, Prologue, 6), which defies the laws of the family, the state and the church. The themes of love and social, political, psychosomatic and sexual emancipation within Romeo and Juliet, therefore, provide philosophy and psychoanalysis with an ideal base from which to critique post-Renaissance theories regarding subjectivity.

Badiou maintains that in order to free it from the constraints of the family (and by extension the state) it is imperative that love is disentangled from idealist, pessimistic and capitalist theories that serve only to bring about a radical reduction in its significance as a philosophical concept. Julia Kristeva writes that ‘the loving couple is outside the law, the law is deadly for it – that, too, is what the story of Romeo and Juliet proclaims as immortalised in Shakespeare’s play’ (Kristeva 1987, 210); being ‘outside the law’ would, therefore, allow the loving couple to demonstrate through their exteriority the potential for new possibilities and the instability of the dominant idealist, pessimistic and capitalist ideologies. This view corresponds with Badiou’s own propositions regarding the incompatibility of eros and the law and his belief that subjects in love should pledge fidelity to the event that permits and encourages them to establish a new and subjective truth separate from the expectations of society.

With his focus on love as an interminable process, as well as his outlook on it being the movement from ‘One’ to ‘Two’, and a shift from identity to difference, Badiou challenges a populist and idealist reading of love that depicts it as the fusion of two beings or souls into one. Whereas a fusional reading of love, based on the prioritising of the ecstasy of the encounter, rejoices in the loss of ‘self’, Badiou’s idea of the ‘Two’ or the ‘We-Subject’ does not negate or dissolve the boundaries of self and other. Rather, as a process that allows sexuation to occur, Badiou’s concept of love maintains the differences between the lovers at the forefront of the relationship and, therefore, establishes that love is not narcissism, nor in its totality an engagement with and integration into the ‘Other’, but an opportunity to construct the world from the prism of sexual difference.

In Romeo and Juliet, Mercutio’s position as made apparent in his exchange with Romeo prior to the Capulet ball, ‘If love be rough with you, be rough with love:/ Prick love for pricking, and you beat love down’ (1.4.27-8), can be considered the epitome of what Badiou terms the sceptical moralist’s stance on love, where love is seen as ‘an ornamental semblance via which the real of sex passes’ (Badiou 2008, 182). Marsh writes that for Mercutio ‘romantic love is, like every other human ideal, a
rationalisation, in this case for the simple sexual urge’ (Marsh 1976, 60): an opinion that can also be ascribed to Juliet’s nurse, for whom marriage and by extension love exists simply in order to legalise and legitimise the sexual relationship.

Badiou aligns this perspective with capitalism’s hedonistic ideals which encourage a ‘zero-commitment’ attitude to love, whereby individuals reject the opportunity to display any fidelity to the amorous event or encounter, if indeed it constitutes such. In contrast, love that exists as a truth procedure is considered a process ‘that triumphs lastingly, sometimes painfully over the hurdles erected by time, space and the world’ (Badiou 2012, 32): a statement which finds no clearer manifestation than in Shakespeare’s tale of woe. The chance and transient nature of the love encounter must be curbed, according to Badiou, in order to transform it point by point into an axiomatic truth that will overcome assaults upon it, both from outside and within the void. This demands from the lovers, therefore, a renewal of the initial fidelity at every ‘point’ in their relationship where their truth is challenged, as opposed to the lack of long-term commitment endorsed by capitalist society.

Comparatively, the ‘zero-risk’ approach to love, as manifest in the agreement made by Juliet’s father and Paris for a marriage of financial convenience, can be regarded as the other face of capitalism’s appropriation of love, with its complete elision of chance and risk from the love encounter. If, as Badiou postulates, the love encounter is a radical event that ruptures normality for the two individuals at the heart of the void, as well as humanity in general through its universality, then by sanctioning and encouraging the eradication of ‘chance’ from the love encounter, capitalism ensures that the pre-arranged love event, though it may engender in the long term a stable and loving relationship, ultimately prevents the initial contact with the Lacanian ‘Real’ and, therefore, inhibits the possibility of emancipation through love. Thus, the ‘zero risk’ system succeeds in its endeavour to preserve social, cultural and political stability on a micro and macro level, a fact that benefits only the hegemonic ideologies within society.

Hugh Grady writes that Romeo and Juliet can be divided into two segments: an earlier comic half and a later tragic one (Grady 2009, 214). In addition to this dichotomy, the play is evidently split between the portrayal in the early half of amour courtois with the relationship of Romeo and Rosaline, and of love as a truth condition in the latter half, as represented by the truth constructed by Romeo and Juliet.
In the earlier half of the play, Romeo is depicted as being selfish and disinterested in anything but his courting of Rosaline and his narcissistic love of love. His self-preservation is exhibited through a self-imposed exile from society, regarding which his father states: ‘Away from light steals home my heavy son,/ And private in his chamber pens himself’ (1.1.135-6). However, marking his transformation into a subject, by the end of the play, a love-struck Romeo decisively acts on the impulse to end his enforced exile and his life as a final act of fidelity to Juliet and his love encounter, demanding upon hearing news of Juliet’s demise, ‘hire post-horses, I will hence tonight’ (5.1.25). Badiou’s statement, ‘love is an antidote to the pursuit of self-interest’ (2012, 17) is exemplified by Romeo’s maturation and rejection of the conventions of *amour courtois* and his infatuation with Rosaline after the encounter with Juliet; this change in Romeo epitomises what for Badiou is the post-evental progression from narcissistic love that involves only the selfish ‘I’ of identity to love as a truth procedure which focuses instead on the selfless ‘We’ of difference.

Derrida states that ‘fidelity is threatened by the difference between the who and the what’ (2007), a concept that Romeo elucidates through means of his thoughts after the encounter with Juliet: ‘Did my heart love till now? Forswear it, sight,/ For I ne’er saw true beauty till this night’ (1.5.2-3). Derrida qualifies this statement by asserting the polarity between the idea of ‘loving someone as an absolute singularity’ (2007) and ‘loving the [singular] qualities of a person’ (ibid.), an idea that is reminiscent of Lacan’s differentiation between love and desire, with love as an ontological ideal opposing the ‘fetishist’ nature of desire. Romeo’s infatuation with Rosaline undoubtedly takes the form of ‘the what’ when one considers his fickle behaviour, but his fetish is not so much for the physical body or qualities of Rosaline as it is for the qualities being in love engenders within him. Romeo’s relationship with Rosaline is, therefore, narcissistic in nature, with Romeo essentially participating in a relationship with himself through the mediation of Rosaline as the other.

Badiou writes that *la scène du deux*, ‘the moment when this Two appear on stage as such and experience the world in a new way can only assume a risky and contingent form’ (2012, 28). The encounter between the lovers occurs at the heart of Juliet’s patriarchal home where the uninvited enemy, Romeo, steals Juliet’s heart from under the watchful gaze of her father; equally, Juliet, aware of her father’s wishes that she marry Paris, makes a conscious decision to pledge fidelity to an event that will have her overthrow patriarchal law. This encounter takes on an epiphanic quality for the lovers which Juliet asserts in the immediate aftermath, ‘Prodigious birth of love it is to me,;/ That I must love a loathèd enemy’ (1.5.140-41), precisely because it acts as a caesura shattering the stability in the quotidian lives of the lovers. It exists, therefore, as an excess in the situation and an
overflowing of *jouissance*, allowing Romeo and Juliet access to a moment wherein the fallibility of their ‘situation’ is made apparent. Badiou considers this experience of the ‘Real’ to be a traumatic one, and yet a trauma that must be welcomed, enjoining all subjects in love to ‘seize in your being that which has seized and broken you’ (quoted in Hallward 2003, 117). Despite the traumatic shattering of the sense of self experienced by the human animal, love as a condition exists as a ‘productive’ truth process; thus, the love event that allows for the production of a new truth to occur is viewed as something that ‘mentally sets us free from the lifeless rules that support imitation over creative innovation and tie us down to our present state of being’ (Riera 2005, 139).

The declaration of love made by the lovers is intrinsic to the truth procedure for Badiou, because it forms the naming of the event which is the initial guarantee of the long term stability of the event and truth. The declaration takes the form of the statement, ‘I love you’ or lexical variations thereof, and the difficulty associated with making this admission and declaration is acknowledged by Badiou and indeed Shakespeare who positions the declaration of the lovers as central to the play thematically. The dynamic of this particular scene is especially significant as it hints at the seismic shift that is about to occur: the balcony occupies a liminal position in this scene, neither inside the home nor completely outside it; Juliet’s soliloquy similarly constitutes a dialogue with herself that is internal and external, private whilst at the same time being overheard. The positioning of Juliet on the balcony of her home permits her to find a middle and somewhat neutral ground upon which she can stand and attempt to verify the veracity of Romeo’s declaration. External to this situation, Romeo’s vow of love is made from the grounds of her home and is an offer to Juliet to abandon her gendered role as ‘angel in the house’ and accompany him in constructing a new world outside the walls and laws of her father’s home.

However, Jacques Derrida summarises a troubling issue regarding the declaration of love, stating that once the initial ‘I love you’ has been said, its repetition becomes meaningless and signifies nothing:

> The request or offer, the promise or the prayer of an 'I love you', must remain unilateral and dissymmetrical. Whether or not the other answers, in one way or another, no mutuality, no harmony, no agreement can or must reduce the infinite disproportion. (Derrida 1997, 220)
If ‘I love you’ is to be considered an interrogative and not a declarative statement, then for Derrida, this question demands an answer to which, because of the ‘unilateral and dissymmetrical’ nature of the declaration, there can be no equal or appropriate response. Juliet’s declaration of love is made during a moment of solitude, ensuring that the veracity of her statement is unquestionable. Romeo’s statements, on the other hand, as a result of their being in response to the initial declaration, fail to match the sincerity of Juliet’s statement, provoking Juliet to demand that Romeo prove instead through action, his love for her: ‘Dost thou love me? ... /... Yet if thou swear’st/ Thou mayst prove false’ (2.2.90-2). This juncture is the precise point, according to Badiou, where the event creates the dichotomy between ‘knowledge’ and ‘truth’, with the pre-eventual knowledge affiliated with the ‘situation’ ceasing to be of any benefit to both lovers, but more so Juliet whose subsequent acceptance of Romeo’s declaration is essentially a leap of faith and a decision to participate in and pledge fidelity to this truth event that promises only the unknown and instability. For Badiou, therefore, ‘I love you’ is neither a statement nor a question, but a speech act and a promise of fidelity to which the only appropriate response is the continued demonstration of fidelity, through action, of both lovers as they struggle for the construction of their new lives.

When Juliet demands from Romeo, ‘deny thy father’ (2.2.34), and Romeo accedes to her request, ‘Call me but love, and I’ll be new baptized’ (2.2.50), Romeo’s denial of his name marks what can be considered a reversal of his initial interpellation as a Montague. By acknowledging his familial ties, Romeo had previously steeped himself in the ideology associated with his family name and the Law of the Father; his decision to abandon this name allows him to reformulate a new identity as Romeo the emancipated subject and lover of Juliet instead of Romeo the subjugated son of his Father. Similarly, within her family home, Juliet is forced to fight against the bourgeoisie mentality of her father who considers her ‘the hopeful lady of my earth’ (1.2.15) and a marriage to Paris, therefore, as nothing more than a profitable business endeavour. Whereas at the start of the play, she responds to Paris’s proposal with the non-confrontational reply, ‘It is an honour that I dream not of’ (1.3.66), Juliet’s new found appreciation of the ‘real’ at the heart of the situation of her patriarchal home and her status as a transgressive lover and subject in love provides her with the impetus to make a stand against her father’s capitalist-orientated wishes for her. Juliet’s emancipation from the Law of the Father begins, therefore, with her refusal to accept and accede to the hegemony of Verona’s ‘zero risk’ attitude to love.

Hallward writes that ‘every event indicates, in principle, a pure beginning, the inaugural or uncountable zero of a new time’ (Hallward 2003, 115); the construction of a truth, therefore,
involves the construction of a new life and new laws: a notion that is especially explicit in *Romeo and Juliet*, where the post-event lovers lose the shackles of their identities and attempt to build a new world together that acknowledges neither Montague nor Capulet. Shakespeare’s tribute to this commitment of the lovers is evident in the name of the play: *Romeo and Juliet* and not *Capulet(s) and Montague(s)*: this is a tale of two individuals who, in fidelity to the love encounter, attempted to divorce themselves from their family names, setting into motion a set of revolutionary consequences.

Whilst Badiou attempts to emphasise the separation between love and politics in order to avoid the possibility of their becoming ‘sutured’ as truth procedures, ‘I don’t think you can mix up love and politics’ (Badiou 2012, 57), there is an unarguable connection between the two that Badiou is forced on numerous occasions to acknowledge. In an interview with Stuart Jeffries, Badiou states that, numerically, love can be considered ‘the minimal form of Communism’ (Jeffries 2012), with the truth procedure of love pertaining to what two individuals are capable of and politics concerning ‘what the collective are capable of’ (ibid.). Regarding the political event, Badiou writes that the ‘collective can greatly limit the power of identity’ (2012, 63), and that large groups of people who act in fidelity to a political event can collectively overcome their own ‘dead egos’ (Badiou 2005, 185), in order to exact change. In a demonstration of the power of love and its transgressive nature in *Romeo and Juliet*, the two subjects are able to effect political change normally associated with the action of a collective. Jottkandt writes that ‘the declaration “I love you”, emerges from the scene of the Two to embrace the you of the individual lover and the You of humanity at large … the unique individual lover becomes at the same time an impersonal subject of truth that bears the “humanity function”’ (Jottkandt 2010, 115). Friar Lawrence is the first individual within the play to see the transformative potential of Romeo and Juliet’s love, stating that the marriage of the two individuals might ‘turn your households’ rancour to pure love’ (2.3. 92).

Despite the numerical difference between love and politics, the personal revolution of the lovers has a far-reaching and universal impact, precisely because of the generic and ‘universal’ nature of the truth event. However, it is only after the tragic death of the lovers that Friar Lawrence’s prophesy is realised and the revolution in love is matched and followed by a larger scale power-based revolution within Verona, with the truth created by the lovers outliving them in the peace and unity that is engendered after their deaths. It is the example set by Romeo and Juliet in prioritising difference over identity and ‘Two’ over ‘One’ that allows the Montagues and Capulets to overcome their own sense of singular identity in order to overthrow the feud between themselves, as seen in the
reconciliation between the two households after the deaths of Romeo and Juliet, ‘O brother Montague give me thy hand’ (5.3.297). As a tribute to the infinite and universal truth that transcends the ‘Two’ of Romeo and Juliet to encompass the ‘collective’ of Verona, the lovers are immortalised by means of the golden statues created in their images, ‘I will raise her statue in pure gold/ ... As rich shall Romeo’s by his lady lie’ (5.3.299-303), as well as by literature as the undisputed universal definition of love.

However, the idea that a truth can be considered ‘universal’ and applicable to all individuals across space and time raises the question of whether what is being construed as a process that allows for a reinvention of subjectivity, is in fact the substitution of dominant and hegemonic ideologies for more palatable truth procedures that are themselves ideologies by another name. This argument is also made by Žižek, who writes: ‘the first thing that strikes anyone versed in the history of French Marxism is how uncannily close Badiou’s notion of Truth-Event comes to Althusser’s notion of (ideological) interpellation’ (Žižek 1999, 141). This argument, though valid in certain regards, fails to acknowledge Badiou’s scathing critique of and attack on Althusser’s notion of ideological interpellation in the pamphlet ‘De l’idéologie’, written in 1976, in which he states:

We must have done with the ‘theory’ of ideology ‘in general’ as imaginary representation and interpellation of individuals as subjects ...

The exploited forge their consciousness in the everydayness of exploitation itself, and not in the meanderings of the imaginary. (Badiou 1976, 7 & 5).

Badiou asserts that Althusser’s definition of ideology as, ‘represent[ing] the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence’ (Althusser 1971, 62) serves to fold ‘the ideological imaginary back on itself, redoubling it’ resulting in its becoming an ‘image of an image ... deprived of any real reference’ (Badiou 1976, 17). The effect of this doubling is the complete loss of any potential to encounter the ‘real’ and mount any form of resistance or rebellion against the situation and ego, an idea that is in complete contradiction to Badiou’s theory of the subject. If the truth process is to be considered a replacement ideology, then it is an ideology that, un-associated with ‘false consciousness’ or an imaginary relation with the world, aims to encourage in the most transparent way possible, only one thing of the human subject: ‘ne pas céder sur son désir’ (Lacan 2001, 321): do not give up on the desire to emancipate yourself and create your ‘own’ truth.
The process of achieving emancipation in and through love forms part of an often violent existential crisis: as a result of Romeo and Juliet’s quest for subjectivity, lives are lost and individuals betray their institutions and superiors. What Romeo and Juliet elucidates for readers, therefore, is that the reinvention of love must occur, by any means, in order to take recover it from the grasp of dominant ideologies that have socialised what should be a revolutionary encounter and event. By electing to die whilst they still possessed the power and autonomy to construct their truth instead of betraying it, Romeo and Juliet proved that despite the pressure from external forces, they recognised that their love was too strong and offered truths that were too ‘new’ to be socialised or overcome by the family and the state. Thus, the death of Romeo and Juliet is the final act of fidelity in a short but ultimately powerful love story and truth that helps engender a new Verona and a new definition of love.

Hallward states: ‘in each case, the Event – the uprising, the encounter, the invention – breaks fundamentally with the prevailing routine’ (2003, 107); by violently rejecting and breaking away from subjection to the conventions of the zero risk, zero chance, idealist and pessimistic notions of love dominant in Verona, and shifting instead towards a self-constructed subjectivity, the lovers succeeded at seizing the opportunity provided to them by the event to define their own truth separate from the expectations of patriarchy, religion and capitalism. It is a testimony to the unfaltering strength of their fidelity to the event that the universal symbols of love, Romeo and Juliet, are, as Derrida states, the only lovers in the history of love to outlive one another (Derrida 2009, 174). Žižek writes that the death of Romeo and Juliet ‘signals a refusal to exchange enjoyment for the Name of the Father’ (1992, 76), an assessment which is essentially a correct one: Romeo and Juliet is a play that celebrates and encourages the prioritising of short-lived enjoyment and freedom over a life of repression and obedience, features characteristic of the human animal’s sense of self. Shakespeare’s canonical play exists, therefore, as a reminder that the love encounter and event is truly a truth worth fighting and dying for. Just as the golden statues are symbolic of the immortality of the lovers, the immortality of Shakespeare’s revolutionary Romeo and Juliet, likewise, is a demonstration of the triumph of desire over death and the supplanting of the situation by truth.

References


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