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# Pure Love: Reading *The Wings of the Dove* with Badiou

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## Abstract

*The Wings of the Dove*, one of the greatest novels of Henry James, has been widely read to scrutinize the role of representation in realistic narrative. Here we will argue that it is dramatization, and not bare representation, which is at issue in the dynamic nature of the text. For us, James is in the pursuit of a literary *mise-en-scène* which would enable him to concentrate on the event of love (and gradually all kinds of events) in its purest form. When there is a question of determining the purest forms of events and relations in general, mathematical abstraction comes to the fore as the ultimate tool for thinking things through. French philosopher Alain Badiou creates a remarkable conceptual network to be able to present such a pure form. Inspired by James among many other artists, Badiou takes the set-theoretical terminology as a starting point and arrives at a full-blown theory of appearances where both the ontology and phenomenology of events can be worked on. Briefly, it is our aim to read James's novel on the basis of Badiou's abstractions and show how the characters of the novel, such as Milly, Kate and Merton, function to dramatize the conditions and effects of an event like love.

## Keywords

Alain Badiou, dramatization, event, Henry James, love, *The Wings of the Dove*

*The Wings of the Dove*, a 1902 novel by Henry James, is wrought with the intriguing themes of love, illness, life and death. While relations and interests seem to motivate the events in the novel, a concentration on the dying character —Milly— brings forth the necessity to reconsider and reformulate the nature of these relations and events. Reading Milly as

a function that enables the relations among other characters, we suggest that the novel performs the event of love in its purest form. Drawing on French philosopher Alain Badiou's conceptualization of the event of love, we explore how Milly as a distinct function resists bare representation. In fact, Milly has often been read as an autobiographical figure and a religious symbol, representing James's cousin Mary (Minny) Temple and Christ's sacrifice respectively. After illustrating that these readings foreground the moral dilemma in the novel, we will discuss how Milly appears to have a performative rather than a symbolic function. We find in Milly's character a resistance to moral reductionism. Therefore, we aim to show that Milly, appearing and disappearing alternately, exists as a void through representation and in spite of it. In Badiou's mathematical abstraction, Milly's status may arguably be formalized as a generic expression of an axiomatic void shared by all multiplicities (*Being and Event* 57).

*The Wings of the Dove* opens with Kate Croy waiting for her father and dressed in black because she has just lost her mother. Kate's Aunt Maud (Mrs. Lowder), who is a wealthy woman, regards Kate's father as a disrespectable man and thus opens her house to Kate. She wants Kate to marry Lord Mark, an aristocratic man, while Kate is in love with Merton Densher, a journalist. Kate and Densher conceal their relationship in hope of getting some money from Aunt Maud. Milly Theale, a young millionairess, appears at this point and becomes a part of their plan. After being orphaned, she has taken a trip to Europe with Susan Stringham, an American novelist and Aunt Maud's friend. Having spent some time in the Alps with Susan, Milly moves to London, where she meets Densher. She already knew Densher from New York where he had been working as a journalist. Kate persuades Densher to make Milly fall in love with him, assuming that she will soon die. When Milly goes to Venice, Kate and Densher follow her to carry out their plan. Although Lord Mark, who also wants to marry Milly, warns her about the plot, she leaves her money to Densher. When Milly dies, however, Densher refuses to take the money. Even though Densher says he will marry Kate in an hour "as we were," Kate, suspecting Densher is in love with Milly's memories, responds: "We shall never be again as we were" (James, *Wings* 533).

The plot in this simplified form easily shows how the characters except Milly find themselves in a certain contamination. Their moral dilemma seems to have determined the paradigm of interpretation for the

novel, centering on autobiographical and symbolic meanings that Milly bears. In fact, *The Wings of the Dove* is often associated with the death of James's cousin, Mary (Minny) Temple. James expresses his intense sorrow on her death in his letters and notebooks.[1] This "hard fact" is transformed through writing into a "soft idea" in James's hands: "I am willing to leave life to answer for life; but meanwhile, thinking how small at greatest is our change with her change and how vast an apathy goes to our little measure of sympathy, I take a certain satisfaction in having simply written twelve pages" (*The Complete Notebooks* 79). James is so sorrowful for Minny's death that he considers his own death as the only meaningful response to this great loss. Instead of dying, however, he chooses to commemorate Minny in his fiction. After writing twelve pages, James notices his satisfaction, which he finds astonishing. In contrast to James's expectations, writing functions as a satisfying device to express a sympathy for Minny's death in this painful situation.

Therefore, one can speculate here that James writes the novel to keep the memory of Minny alive or, as Evelyn Ender points out, to come to terms with his sense of guilt caused by Minny's desire to be closer to James when she was ill (Ender 157). Referring to Minny's request from James to take her from cold North America to Italy, Ender draws attention to James's moral dilemma once again: "Literature had become his passion and there would be only one place to show that he cared for his cousin, namely his books [...]" (157). James's indifference to Minny's request and her ensuing death results in a compensating act of writing, which gives rise to ethical questions regarding astheticization of illness, life and death.

Besides the question of whether James can pay tribute to Minny's memory by recreating her, there is also the question of how he represents himself. Autobiographical interpretations of the novel tend to search for James's double in the novel. Millicent Bell finds the answer in Densher, who denies his love for Milly very much like James, who denies his love for his cousin, Minny (xvii). Furthermore, Densher has authorial characteristics such as "the novelist's gift for observation and reflection" (xviii). According to Ender, Densher redeems himself "by belatedly falling in love with the dying girl" (161). Therefore, as "the literary encapsulation of Henry James," he becomes a window that "opens onto Henry James's soul" and "soon

1 See, for example, *Henry James, Selected Letters* 77 and *The Complete Notebooks* 79.

closes again" (161). There are intense autobiographical moments in the text whose basic investment is artistic and aesthetic in nature (162).

The search for redemption in the autobiographical moments, together with an intense desire for aestheticization, led some scholars to foreground Milly as a religious icon. The title of the novel evokes the biblical line, "Though ye have lain among the pots, yet shall ye be as the wings of a dove covered with silver, and her feathers with yellow gold" (Psalms 68:13, qtd. in Tambling 140). This connotation may refer either to the transfiguration of the ordinary to the aesthetically beautiful (Tambling 140) or the destruction of "any possibility of fulfilled meaning" (Rowe 134). Rowe suggests that "Milly's association with the dove and the ultimate immanence of the Holy Spirit evokes the ambiguity of the Word diffused in the world by Christ's sacrifice. The novel remains a world unto itself, any meaning beyond it being reduced to silence and void" (134). Milly then enables other characters to recognize their distance from each other as well as the variety of their desires: "At the end of *The Wings of the Dove*, we are left with a shattered, fallen world become conscious of itself" (136). Rowe does not simply suggest that Milly as a figure of Christ and Passion symbolized by "dove" represents an absolute authority. On the contrary, he says, "Milly's symbolization through the various points of view which encircle her in the novel does not lead to a 'sacred fount' of origins, but into the ambiguity and mystery of consciousness itself" (138).

"The ambiguity and mystery of consciousness" emphasized by Rowe points out James's style of telling stories from different perspectives. Milly, both as an autobiographical figure and a religious symbol, nevertheless represents James's cousin and Christ's sacrifice respectively, even though the Jamesian aesthetization problematizes signification itself. The variety of perspectives is often viewed as a device to highlight what Bell calls "the drama of moral choice" (xliv). Our attempt to read Milly as a generic expression of an axiomatic void shared by multiplicities, however, does not construct any drama encircled with a moral choice. The gist of the performance rather bears witness to an event that occurs inconsistently and undecidably, thereby going against the grain of "the state of the situation" in Badiou's formulation (*Being and Event* 95).

Although firmly situated in the tradition of French rationalism, Alain Badiou the philosopher constructed a highly dramatic system incommensurably more intricate than the systems of the classical names

like Descartes and Pascal. This is the case not only because he is a well-known playwright and a novelist but also because he has created a complex nexus of concepts based upon the term "event." At the risk of overly simplifying his project without detailing it rigorously up front, it would nevertheless be fair to say that his ultimate concern is "making an event out of the thought as an event." Modified from one of the statements that Badiou makes concerning the poet Stephane Mallarmé in the first volume of his quintessential work entitled *Being and Event*,[2] this formulation begs for immediate explication which will be roughly provided in what follows.

First things first: Badiou, taking his departure from the Parmenidean foreclosure of ontological thinking, turns everything upside down and tells us, in the opening lines of *Being and Event*, that "if one is not, then (the) nothing is" (36). This is basically another way of saying that what comes first in the realm of being is not a consistent one, or one-ness, but an inconsistent multiplicity which is preceded by literally nothing. Therefore "nothing" is distinguished as a separate variable at the very beginning. For Badiou, the only discourse which comes as adequate to such an apparently simple yet complicated proposition might only be mathematics. Hence Badiou equates ontology with mathematics here, thereby radicalizing the rationalist project a great deal. The philosophical decision aligning mathematics with ontology is historically sound for Badiou since modern mathematics, especially in the hands of mathematicians like Cantor, Gödel, Zermelo, Fraenkel, Cohen and others, gained enough expressive power to reveal its own essence: It has become the discourse of pure multiplicity thanks to the axiomatic set theory. Set theory requires first and foremost that everything be multiple in the form of sets. By definition, any member of a given set must be another set consisting of itself next to, what is called, the empty set, an axiomatic void shared by all the multiplicities.

When the relationships between these sets are at stake, however, they need to be individually presented and for Badiou, this can solely be done by the operation of "count-as-one" (*Being and Event* 90). The sets, or the multiplicities, which are counted-as-one are then called "situations." Everything we experience separately in the World, therefore, is a situation. But the pure being of the situation, or the operation of counting, lies outside

2 "The stakes of casting dice 'from the bottom of a shipwreck' are those of making an event out of the thought of the event" (193).

of this experience, or more accurately put, constructs the outside. And here we find the exact place where the empty set comes to the fore. Once the multiple takes the shape of a situation, there is something essential which is excluded from the count. But then we include this essential item back to the count as the uncounted. Since it would be detrimental for the situation, that is the consistent, counted multiple to encounter with something not counted, a structural "recount" takes place, saving the consistency of the given multiplicity. Badiou calls this metastructure "the state of the situation" or the representation (95). It is a kind of internal strategy to make sure that nothing remains uncounted, but alas, "nothing," or the void, always remains uncounted at the end, to be able to deem the very act of counting possible.

When the act of counting cannot be limited in principle, sets are bound to be infinite. The infinity broadens the chasm opened between a situation and its representation, leading to a mathematical anomaly in the system. With the introduction of an unknowable category like the void, the extent of a given set turns out to be impossible to calculate within that system. Therefore, an extra-mathematical, that is, extra-ontological term is required to account for the gap, and to take up the burden of decision. "Event" as a concept has been created by Badiou to address nothing but this problem, and all the other philosophical categories such as truth and subject which Badiou has been emphasizing since the late 1980s derive from it. For example, truth is described as an infinite generic set—whose mathematical foundation was laid out by Paul Cohen—in any situation, which "a-voids"[3] having its properties (*Being and Event* 339). Therefore, if its belonging to the situation is claimed, it must be decided first. And such decision requires the intervention of a subject which will be formed in due course. Events emerge when there is a truth procedure in a given situation, a procedure which develops only through the existence of subjects whose fidelity makes the primary decision effective. According to Badiou, there are only four such procedures: Science, politics, art and love ("The (Re)turn" 14).

It is now time to remember the formula with which we began our introduction to the philosophy of Badiou: "making an event out of the thought as an event." For him, the interactions of art and love come closer

3 "Avoid" is used in this sense by Alex Ling in the "Ontology" section of the book *Alain Badiou: Key Concepts* (54).

to such an ideal than the other procedures. Referring to a poem written by Alberto Caeiro, an heteronym of the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa, Badiou swiftly describes love as follows: "To love is to think." And as he makes it quite explicit in his essay "What is Love?" artistic expression, especially that of novelistic prose, bears witness to this essential equation between love and thought (180). The role that philosophy must play in such a setting is to provide a logical space for the equation, rendering "the compossibility" of art and love in a given time more visible. Alain Badiou makes this point quite clear by saying that "[n]o theme requires more pure logic than that of love" (183).

In a treatise called "The Scene of Two" written in 1999, Badiou presented for the first time the logical formalization of the event of love in accordance with the philosophical framework just outlined. Starting out with one of the most famous Lacanian propositions, the one which states that there is no sexual relationship and that love comes as a supplement to replace the lack of sexual rapport, Badiou elaborates his position through two theorems. The first one tells us that where there is a non-existence or lack, only an excess can be used as a supplement. And according to the second one, the truth of this situation is constructed only by an event. In case of love, the event which takes the place of a non-existence is called "the encounter." Since the two sexuated poles of the relationship have nothing in common, or in other words, since their conjunction is simply empty, the sexual situation needs to get in contact with its uncounted element. And encounter turns out to be the name given to this element. For Badiou, the uncounted element here bears the most minimal value (symbolized with a lower case u) possible in the situation, marking the common membership of both of the sexuated positions to the set of humanity.[4] Once the event as encounter takes place in a sexuated situation, there are two disparate possibilities: Either this minimal value becomes "the One from which the Two slips away" or it is accepted as "the separated common One from which the Two is positioned." In both ways the minimal value tends to disappear or to become null while the Two is established as a distinct

4 Seven years later, in 2006, Badiou published the second volume of his *Being and Event* project, entitled *Logics of Worlds*, where he adds the other truth procedures up to the calculation, outlining a full formalization of the dimension of existence next to that of being. Unlike being, it turns out that existence admits more than two possibilities; that is, between the minimal and maximal degrees of existence (appearance in a world), there are other degrees which mark the passage from inexistence to existence, or vice versa.

entity in the situation. Love, then, is nothing but the construction of the Two based on an excessive event with a minimal value in the situation. As this uncounted, therefore indeterminate element disappears through the two possibilities just described, it reestablishes the situation all together. Badiou, at the end of the essay, likens this double disappearance of the event to a "limping march" ("The Scene of Two"). And James's *The Wings of the Dove* presents us with a wonderful exposition of such a limping march. The dove of the novel is not flying up in the sky, but limping in the streets of London and Venice.

Milly appears in the novel at a very late stage, leaving the state of the situation to Kate and Densher for about one hundred pages. As we learn from James's preface to the novel, he rewrote his first draft to delay Milly's first appearance in the novel. He had in fact realized that "[i]f one had seen that [Milly's] stricken state was but half her case, the correlative half being the state of others as affected by her (they too should have a 'case', bless them, quite as much as she!) then I was free to choose, as it were, the half with which I should begin'" (*Wings* 8). The state of others—Kate and Densher—is introduced to us earlier than the appearance of Milly. Aunt Maud's house Lancaster Gate can be viewed as the state of situation for Kate and Densher, as it is used as the setting for their representation. Kate appears to be a rich woman of status only through her aunt's help and Densher appears in the novel through Kate's love for him. Densher's profession is perhaps another such addendum to the state of the situation since reporting itself is based on representation, or a "recount" of the occurences. When Milly finally appears, she first functions as a minimal supplement to this state of affairs.

We have argued that Milly's undecidable position with regard to representation resembles a limping march. It is the time to see how. In a conversation with her companion Susan Stringham, she says: "Since I've lived all these years as if I were dead, I shall die, no doubt, as if I were alive – which will happen to be as you want me." She also makes the following remark: "you'll never really know where I am. Except indeed when I'm gone; and then you'll only know where I'm not" (*Wings* 167). When Milly raises the question of presence and absence she stages a resistance to be recounted as a well-defined element. Life and death here are undecidable situations that show us no-thing (i.e. the source of an event) happens with Milly's presence or absence. That is why the Bronzino portrait reminds Milly of her own life

whose effect may not be more than the effect of the dead lady in the portrait: "And she was dead, dead, dead. Milly recognized her exactly in words that had nothing to do with her. 'I shall never be better than this'" (183). However this is not a desire to become more apparent, as she wants to die "without its being noticed" (187).

Milly moves back and forth to appear and disappear. This movement finds a reflection also in her identification by people with an excess of money, as this quantifiable excess is subdued at some points by Milly. Thinking about his relationship with Milly, Densher perceives that "it was neither Kate nor he who made his strange relation to Milly." "Milly herself did everything," he goes on, "Milly herself, and Milly's house, and Milly's hospitality, and Milly's manner, and Milly's character, and, perhaps still more than anything else, Milly's imagination [. . .]" (414). Her quantifiable excess is replaced by Milly herself as everything which comes out of no-thing. Susan Stringham's description of Milly as "a thousand and one things" (270) may imply how she adds herself to the quantifiable excess as something not quantifiable or counted.

Milly's illness and the dramatic fact that she will soon die can itself be considered a performance of appearance as disappearance. Milly leaves the setting of representation by degrees, first going to the Palazzo Leporelli in Venice, then leaving the world. The letter that she writes to Densher contributes to this performance as it remains unread, even unsealed. When the letter arrives at the addressee, Kate and Densher feel it as a threat to their relationship. Milly becomes visible through this letter, but Densher wants Kate "to see" it: "I have wanted to let you see – and in preference even to myself – something I feel as sacred" (519). However, Kate throws "the thing" into the flame (520), in an attempt to return it to where it comes from: It supposedly becomes a no-thing coming from the nothingness.

In the process, the state of the situation has been dramatically transformed by an event as expressed, at the last point, by Kate: "We shall never be again as we were" (533). When Kate tells Densher that he is afraid of "all the truth," that he is in love with Milly, Densher replies, "I never was in love with her" (532). The passage between the minimal and maximal appearances of Milly, marked by her gradual disappearance altogether, places Merton Densher and Kate Croy at the disjunction of their impossible relation. It is exactly at this point that they realize what it takes to become

Two. They are, at the same time, the Two "which slips away from the One" and the Two which can only become possible by positioning itself in the "separated common one" (Badiou, "The Scene of Two"). At the same time that the dove has folded its "wonderful wings" and "spread them the wider" (James, *Wings* 498) to cover the emptiness it came to present, thereby making an event out of the thought as a pure event of love.

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