

**Antonia Soulez, *Détrôner l'Être. Wittgenstein Antiphilosophe ? (En réponse à Alain Badiou)*, “Les Discours Philosophique”, Paris : Lambert-Lucas, 2016, 297 pp., ISBN : 978-2-35935-169-9**

In her newest book, Antonia Soulez accomplishes a fair criticism of Alain Badiou's interpretation of Wittgenstein's work<sup>1</sup>. Badiou's assessment of Wittgenstein is tested, namely his portrayal of Wittgenstein as an anti-philosopher – a labelling he burrows from Lacan<sup>2</sup> – is examined in the light of an analysis of the same excerpts from Wittgenstein that Badiou uses to justify his position, plus other citations that go well beyond the expanse of observations that are Badiou's chosen ground. *Détrôner l'Être. Wittgenstein Antiphilosophe ? (En réponse à Alain Badiou)*, is a courageous and nutritious writing, that succeeds not only in giving an insightful review of Alain Badiou's appraisal of the Austrian philosopher, as in offering an interpretation of Wittgenstein that is backed up by rigorous arguments – and supported by a solid knowledge of Wittgenstein's vast writings (as well as by a familiarity with important secondary literature), from the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*<sup>3</sup> to the latest observations that he left us.

Soulez's book title brings to the fore one of Wittgenstein dictations for Schlick<sup>4</sup>, viz. one called “Philosophy” (*Philosophie*). The relevant passage is as follows:

One can also say: there is no such thing as the problem of philosophy, but only problems of philosophy, i.e., linguistic confusions which I can clear up. Philosophy is not destroyed by the remark which dethrones the words ‘language’, ‘sense’, ‘world’, etc., rather the remark itself is a philosophical remark. The word ‘philosophy’ too is not a

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<sup>1</sup> Alain Badiou, *L'Antiphilosophie de Wittgenstein*, “Antiphilosophique Collection”: Nous, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p.7.

<sup>3</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus – Logisch-philosophische Abhandlung*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2003. [Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Bertrand Russell (intro.), David Pears, Brian McGuinness (trans.), London & New York: Routledge, 1961. Henceforth: TLP.]

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Ludwig Wittgenstein, Friedrich Waismann, *The Voices of Wittgenstein: The Vienna Circle*, Gordon Baker (transcription, ed., intro.), Gordon Baker, Michael Mackert, John Connoli, Vasilis Politis (trans.), German / English ed., London & New York: Routledge, 2003.

In France, this volume was first edited by Antonia Soulez in 1996. The author re-edited it in 2015. The latter comprises a portrait of Friedrich Waismann, written by Brian McGuinness: Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Dictées à Friedrich Waismann et pour Moritz Schlick. Années 1930*, Antonia Soulez (ed.), Jan Sebestik, Antonia Soulez, François Schmitz, Jean-Pierre Cometti, Gérard Guest, Christiane Chauviré, Ludovic Soutif (trans.), “Analyse et philosophie”, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Paris: Vrin, 2015.

metalogical word. Philosophy receives its pathos from the pathos of the propositions which it destroys. It overthrows idols, and it is the importance of these idols which gives it its importance. The only metalogical aspect of philosophy is believing in those things which it exposes as being non-metalogical. That is its connection with the metalogical.<sup>5</sup>

(I will come back to this.)

The dictations for Schlick, that encompass Wittgenstein's conversations with Friedrich Waismann, were made in the beginning of the thirties, after having published the TLP and after a time when, although not quitting philosophy completely – one only needs to remember his discussions with Frank P. Ramsey, whom visits Wittgenstein while he was an elementary school teacher in rural Austria – he had abandoned his book, i.e., he let it run its course. As is well known to all, Wittgenstein believed the book did away with all the problems of philosophy, leaving nothing else to say<sup>6</sup>. Later on, he recognizes the difficulties that the book raised – though he is not of the opinion that it was all wrong, but that it was, as he told Elizabeth Anscombe, like a clock that does not tell the right time. Those difficulties challenge him and eventually lead him back to philosophy: Wittgenstein resumes his work, first by facing his *Abhandlung* again, then, driven by a new philosophical perspective, by encouraging new methodologies and a new vision of language and of human life. For example, solipsism, as it appeared in the *Tractatus* (as pure realism), will change and transform. In due course, form(s) of life, the given, will appear.

It is the passage, from one philosophical point of view to another, that Soulez captures with the words “de l'Être à l'être”. These give us the running thread of the book, that does not limit itself to evaluate Badiou's thoughts on the *Tractatus*, but explores the importance of the philosophical activity that ensued it. Badiou does not recognize its value, nor does he take it seriously<sup>7</sup> (an attitude that is not a novelty or an originality of his: Bertrand Russell thought that Wittgenstein had given up on hard work).

The change from Being, capitalized, to being, with a lowercase letter, is a touchstone of Soulez's account of Wittgenstein's work, as well as of the gist of his philosophy, which, according to the French author, he will come to support – as the

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<sup>5</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, Friedrich Waismann, *The Voices of Wittgenstein: the Vienna Circle*, pp. 121-123.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. TLP, Preface and 7.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Alain Badiou, *L'Antiphilosophie de Wittgenstein*, p. 11.

citation transcribed above shows. In it, the destruction of idols requires taking words off their pedestal that had been essential to Wittgenstein and, one should add, to many other philosophers too.

Soulez claims that, if Wittgenstein is indeed an anti-philosopher, he is so only to the extent that he is an anti-metaphysical thinker, that is to say, not so much against philosophy *per se*, but against the status and estimation of certain words, often assumed as sublime. Wittgenstein calls our attention to the consequences of giving in to such assumptions, for example, loosing sight of the familiar atmosphere and contexture of words – that seem to belong to a higher sphere – thus neglecting to see what might help us understand how they are really used, i.e., the role they play in our human ways of acting.

For this reason, Antonia Soulez considers that, for Wittgenstein, “to philosophize rhymes with the desublimation of the objects we envision and to which we give an elevated standing, an aura. These forms of language that fascinate us, are the result of a subjective exaltation. The affect takes up a lot of space.”<sup>8</sup>

Still bearing in mind the dictation we cited earlier on, it should be noted that it truly is of consequence for Soulez’s book: it reveals a change in Wittgenstein’s development, that the author takes in her hands as a tool to clarify what is it that Badiou means when he talks of anti-philosophy, what makes him call Wittgenstein an anti-philosopher? In the end, it is this illuminating tool that allows Soulez to show that Badiou fell short in his portraiture of Wittgenstein.

For Badiou, the qualities that make up an anti-philosopher include, among other things that he lists, the task of pointing out to other philosophers that the character of the conditions and truths of philosophy is always contemporary; that the construction of new concepts is done in the tumult of times, so that they must always be watchful of what already exists, though without letting themselves be absorbed by academic knowledge; the anti-philosopher is also a rebel and someone that adopts the voice of a master.<sup>9</sup>

Badiou cautions the anti-philosopher, whom, albeit the necessity – that is his – of not being satisfied with what is established, can not challenge philosophy leading it into ruin – and, according to Soulez, Badiou believes Wittgenstein defies philosophy, i.e., he writes against it, namely in his TLP. Soulez convincingly observes that Wittgenstein does not do such thing and does not intend it either: philosophy, while critique of language, is

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<sup>8</sup> Antonia Soulez, *Détrôner l’Être. Wittgenstein Antiphilosophe ? (En réponse à Alain Badiou)*, p. 225.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Alain Badiou, *L’Antiphilosophie de Wittgenstein*, p.8.

given the important task of clarifying the expression of thought. However, for Badiou, philosophy is “philosophy as mathematics inaugurated by Plato”<sup>10</sup>, and he ends up rejecting the tractarian view in its entirety. Badiou takes it very seriously that anti-philosophers should not endanger mathematics and thinks it risky that they quickly give in to the temptation of doing just that – regarding this matter, Wittgenstein’s case is even more of a problem for Badiou, seeing that he deems him something of a genius in this field and believes that he reduced it to mere “child’s play”<sup>11</sup> (many writings of Wittgenstein’s contradict this evaluation<sup>12</sup>). Badiou thinks that a distaste for mathematics is lethal, and it is also because of this that he chooses not to explore Wittgenstein’s work beyond the *Tractatus*, where, he declares, he senses it already, although still mixed with “adoration”.

Moreover, it is because he limits himself to one possible form of anti-philosophy, that Badiou restricts it and himself to the *Tractatus*, which, as was pointed out before, he finally dismisses. Antonia Soulez, on the other hand, distinguishes between varieties of anti-philosophy. Four might apply to Wittgenstein: the anti-philosophy that concerns every philosophical effort (Soulez thinks Badiou overlooks this particular kind of anti-philosophy, since he does not recognize it in Plato<sup>13</sup>); the anti-philosophy that fights against the Being of metaphysics (for example, the anti-philosophy that fights Plato’s Platonism, or Wittgenstein’s anti-philosophy towards his TLP, in a way a heir of Plato’s by way of Frege’s influence); the anti-philosophy that renounces explanation in favour of philosophy as a practice; finally, the anti-philosophy combined in the polyphony of voices that aims at dissuading the voice of temptation or propensity towards idealization.

The latter resonates with the need “to eliminate the *pathos* of affect from understanding”<sup>14</sup>. Wittgenstein wants to dismantle the affect responsible for the sublimation of certain words. This, Soulez sees as part of the fight against the desire to philosophize with the goal of theorizing and idealizing, instead of acting. Still, the French

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<sup>10</sup> Antonia Soulez, *Détrôner l’Être. Wittgenstein Antiphilophe ? (En réponse à Alain Badiou)*, p. 12.

<sup>11</sup> Alain Badiou, *L’Antiphilosophie de Wittgenstein*, p. 12.

<sup>12</sup> Cf., e.g., *The Big Typescript’s* chapters on the foundations of mathematics, cardinal numbers, mathematical proof and the infinite in mathematics: Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Big Typescript: Ts213*, Kritische zweisprachige Ausgabe Deutsch–Englisch, C. Grant Luckhardt, Maximilian A. E. Aue (ed. / English trans.), Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005, pp. 370-391, pp. 392-416, pp. 417-442 and pp. 483-505, respectively.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Antonia Soulez’s, *Détrôner l’Être*, first chapter: “Ce mot d’*antiphilosophie*”, pp. 23-54. Cf. also pp. 238-236, section 9, “Une philosophie de la propension ou le sujet de la tendance: «Socrate est aussi un grand érotique» (Nietzsche)”, from chapter V: “L’antiphilosophie selon Lacan” (pp. 203-244).

<sup>14</sup> Antonia Soulez, *Détrôner l’Être. Wittgenstein Antiphilophe ? (En réponse à Alain Badiou)*, pp. 236-244.

author thinks that Wittgenstein's philosophy, although seeking to reach a certain coolness (in the sense of evenness of emotions), capable of deterring our tendency to break from the real world, does not leave us cold, i.e., indifferent: "either we love it or we don't"<sup>15</sup>. Thus, Soulez acknowledges that, maybe, concerning Wittgenstein's writings, we cannot do without the *pathos* of understanding<sup>16</sup>. It's true. Understanding him seems to require or be dependent upon an affinity between the reader and the author, to which Wittgenstein occasionally alludes to. For instance, in the TLP, where he says: "anyone who understands *me*" (TLP, 6.54)<sup>17</sup>, or later when he speaks of those for whom he writes that are in sympathy with his spirit – friends that are scattered throughout the corners of the globe. Be that as it may, Soulez does not subscribe to the idea that "it would be necessary to restore the affect in his philosophy, although this tempts many interpreters!"<sup>18</sup>

What seems, on reflection, to be the decisive thing for Soulez, is the need of resisting the *pathos* of philosophy for confusing and mystifying our relations with words, making these appear as something unique and worthy of a capital letter. Soulez wants to preserve the wittgensteinian goal of acquiring some amount of cool, a kind of self-possession that enables one to battle "the *passions* that arise and parasite our concepts", while aware that philosophy is not impervious to *pathos*, though a *pathos* that is keen on destroying idols.

In conclusion, it should be said that, in *Détrôner l'Être, Wittgenstein Antiphilosophie? (En réponse à Alain Badiou)*, Antonia Soulez investigates other issues (perhaps no less important) besides the ones mentioned in this review, which aimed at a general description. A rewarding read for all those who study Wittgenstein, it also will not disappoint those who profit from reading a book that manages to do something difficult: "justice to the facts"<sup>19</sup>. In Soulez's *Détrôner l'Être*, the facts concern Wittgenstein's work.

#### **Literature:**

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 239.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 240.

<sup>17</sup> Italics added.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 236.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Ludwig Wittgenstein, "Bemerkungen Über Frazers *Golden Bough*", in *Philosophical Occasions*, James C. Klagge, Alfred Nordmann (eds.), Indianapolis & Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993, p. 128: "Nothing is so difficult as doing justice to the facts."

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