

the insubordination of joan of arc

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TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

The role of a translator's note is always to lament the struggle of transmission, to draw attention to the series of impasses that a translation inevitably presents. Badiou's French text is on Joan's life and posthumous legacy. Its largely florid and poetical mode of reflection eludes being captured by the brutishness of English. The resistance of rendering one language into another that the task of translation places before us is in fact analogous to the problematic Badiou puts before us in the following article. Badiou poses us the question "Who is she?" The very enigma of Joan of Arc is precisely her resistance to being fully captured

within signification, despite the numerous attempts to do so — whether literary, musical, religious, or political. Yet Joan still holds relevance for us today as a figure of this very resistance itself. She can be claimed by no-one, but only properly alluded to by those who take up her up in her own terms of resistance. This resistance figures into Badiou's own conception of subjectivity in the process of what he calls a political truth procedure. Her subjectivity is the process of her transition from the routine of everyday existence into becoming an historical figure of France, whose story captivates and fascinates us to this day. Joan repels all the available predicates of her time; she is a peasant who addresses herself directly to the king; a woman who takes up the traditionally masculine position of a political and military leader against the English; a Catholic who comes into sharp confrontation with the Church, leading to her eventual execution on the pyre. Badiou's presentation of Joan's resistance to these predicates confronts the translator with the same resistance he exalts. One translates in despair, and yet, by undergoing the very process of translation, something new emerges. Just as Joan's subjectivity of resistance permeates all attempts to capture her, so too does a text's elusiveness engender the never-ending task of translation, the attempt to signify in another language what cannot be fully signified.

Who is she? For she lies buried beneath interpretations and sublimations. She is like someone who, burnt and scattered, would have nothing less than innumerable tombs everywhere; where none could claim, unlike Mallarmé's tombs, to complete the poem of her existence and her oeuvre.

The tomb of Christ, in Hegel's meditation, draws its power from its own

uniqueness and its void. The innumerable tombs of Joan — literary, political, historic, religious, cinematographic, or poetic — are however filled to the brim with disparate significations. But ultimately, these significations have something deceitful about them, whether we envision them each for themselves or in their incomprehensible totality.

She is veiled only in beauty! The abstract sublime of Schiller, the patriotic passion of Michelet, and Péguy, a disjunctive synthesis of socialism, nationalism, and universal Christianity. Or Claudel, who binds her to the verse and the music of Honegger more surely than to the pyre.

Such faces are given to her in the artifice of reproduction, to make us dream of this absent gaze, of that unimaginable body! The Falconetti of Dreyer, the Ingrid Bergman of Hollywood, Florence's Delay of Bresson, Sandrine Bonnaire of Rivette. She passes behind these captors of light like a shadow suddenly called to a secondary, provisional destiny. Because, having existed, she is not a role to which an interpretation must hold as tightly as possible to an impossible resurrection. But who is she? Who brings her back to life?

There is also only ugliness or equivocations. This begins with Shakespeare's sarcasm, the English enemy. But here there is also the obscenity of Voltaire, convinced that, to crush infamy, it is appropriate to turn Joan into a wartime song of the barracks. She resists this treatment. But who resists? And so we find, in our cities, all these inept statues of Joan perched upon an extremely shabby bronze horse, adorned with her banner. She competes with the sinister monuments where one can read the interminable list of massacres born of the butchery of 1914-1918. The satisfying mediocrity of the Third Republic engendered a short-circuit between a nationalistic Joan and an absurd war. A short-circuit which is equally the drama of Péguy's life, the crucifixion of his poem by the villainy of the era. Long before these calamitous fetishes, Joan irradiates her subsistent enigma. But the enigma of what?

Who is she, that there could be both the anti-Joan of Voltaire and Michelet's Joan, the incarnation of the people? The nationalistic and Catholic Joan, France's eldest daughter of the Church, and the Joan of resistance and emancipation? The last war brought the enigma to its fever pitch. For there was the Joan of Pétain and the Joan of the Resistance. There is a Joan of the darkest reaction, of denunciation and collaboration; and a Joan of the communists, the very same which, along with the secret Party, returned the colours of France to Aragon. Even today, there is a Joan of Le Pen and the National Front. Or a Joan for those for whom the watchword is no longer the rallying cry of resistance against the powerful and militaristic invader, "to throw the English out of France"; but the watchwords of the dejection and persecution of the most vulnerable of our compatriots, the terrifying slogan of "throwing the *sans papiers* out of France." Against what can we reclaim a Joan for whom France is nothing if she is not within the imperative of resistance? If she, the Joan in the midst of her prayer, does not propose to tie all that is beholden to universal maxims for us in the midst of a political declaration? Accordingly, who can declare that those who have lived here for years, with or without documents, are as much from here as we are?

It seems to me that the enigma of Joan is this: the singularity of her emergence in the knot of dissimilar and discarded predicates. For Joan, on her part, would never accept to be reducible to them as a whole, nor to another one. Each of Joan's tombs attempts the contrary of this reduction, or at best this totalisation, for Joan is always the unspoken remainder of attempts to make her signify this or that.

The predicates with which we ensnare Joan are known to us all. There is France, the nation. There is Christianity, the religion. There is Royalty, the State. There is war, the army, and battles. Captivity, the trial, and torture. There is, diagonally across all others, femininity, the young girl simultaneously, in the world of yesteryear, vulnerable amongst all others, and nevertheless inaccessible, a weakness identical to her armour.

When we combine these predicates, we obtain what must be called practical

oxymorons, absolutely improbable collisions. These are what fascinate artists, as an oxymoron is an essential operation, because it delivers the impractical connections in language which art renders necessary. And thus, we have something like the movement of the sublime: a young girl as a military leader. The peasant who personally addresses the king. The victim whose transparent speech brings her directly into contact with the brutality of the judges. The saint burnt as a heretic and a sorceress.

Yet such is the force of these collisions, singular as they are, that we have the strong feeling that Joan has become petrified amid the artistic and sensitive resources. She becomes a repertoire, a collection of emblems. And the thinking of what she represents subtracts itself for the benefit of a signifying force which nullifies the risk that constitutes the whole.

This is undoubtedly beyond what Joan could have been, which we do not consider enough, as a reversal of the available predicates, that which she chose not to be, in a situation which was hers. Because this “not to be” is that which Joan — keeping at a distance the essential or appropriate figure that the situation imposed upon everybody — is less a shimmering and magnificent crystallisation of time, but more, an exception of this time, an event altogether hazardous and contingent. This is the only thing which illuminates that she is still worthwhile for us, for everyone, independent of the predicates which constitute her. There is no longer royalty or Christendom. Being a woman no longer has the same signification. France rarely ever poses the question of what will remain of her in Europe. It is less a question of kicking the English out of the country and more about how to engage with them, or how not to be completely absorbed by the bulk of Germany. We do not believe in saints or sorcerers. Within our predictable wars, whether they be rampant or apocalyptic, the question of knowing which functionary is going to be the one to press the buttons bothers us not one bit. Yet Joan remains a force and an enigma. She remains, for us, eternally available. How does one think that this woman, for whom all the apparent predicates return to a now obscure fifteenth century, could be so contemporary? It must be that her truth, or the

truth that she herself is, lies in the gaze of this fifteenth century, at the same time, entirely immanent and nevertheless subtracted. She is destined to be, albeit in the mode that she is destined, eternally accessible outside of it. Would Joan be this: the affirmative essence of a century, precisely because she is this century outside of itself?

SHE WHO LEAVES

There exist centuries where the general opinion is that they have been particularly dark, even in light of this long suite of massacres and disasters that we all know from human history. Or rather, as Marx said, its interminable prehistory. No one thinks, for example, that this is the case in our century as it nears its completion, which has carried the crime of the State to such perfection that we have trouble comprehending what has happened. But perhaps we contend that the value of this century is precisely as capable of maintaining the proof of the eternal return that, according to Nietzsche, had all the obstinacy, the force of thought, courage, so that a certain quantity of justice, of creation, of resistance and of a universalizable affirmative vision can subsist. They subsist under conditions that are often, in effect, as barbaric and nocturnal as the ones which incarnate the allegoric protagonist of Ernest Jünger's novella, the one entitled the Head Forester. For the time to come, it falls to the one who has not ceded to the Head Forester so they will not return to carry the century on their shoulders.

The beginning of the fifteenth century, with its infinite war, its band of brigands destroying everything which exists, its dilapidated figures of the state, its famines, has everything which appears in the anthology of disastrous periods. Already the fourteenth century had as its fatal sign the Black Plague. But for us, it is on Joan's behalf that this moment is carried to what is essential in what remains, instead of the public calamity that does nothing but harden the chaotic and habitually vile traits of the world's ordinary path. That which destines a miserable epoch to a sort of subsistent truth which always emerges from an exception.

It is of importance to consider that Joan did not choose to be what her century offered her in the usual run of things, or as an available predicate. Joan, in this respect, conforms greatly to that which the English novel knew to designate as the exceptional function of the young girl, as she who leaves. She leaves behind not only Domrémy, but all that the century destined for a young girl of her age and her provenance. She even leaves in the normal way of leaving. It is, in these conditions, themselves twisted and obscure, which Virginia Woolf calls *The Voyage Out*, in the title of one of her novels, dedicated to a young woman: this has been translated into French, somewhat remotely but acceptably, as *La Traversée des apparences* (*The Traversal of appearances*). Each predicative appearance: the peasant, the Christian, the patriot, but also the warrior, or the prisoner, is not carried or endured, but traversed by default, caught out, by Joan's successive choices, not to be that which the situation prescribed her to be. Where she never ceases to emerge, to be faithful to her own emergence, is within this very individual mixture of the Joan-event, this unwavering certitude and astonishment at what is happening to her.

Take the connection between Joan and France, the nation, which is without a doubt the origin of the most striking oppositions in her posthumous destiny. The mission that Joan is given, by the imperative intervention of the celestial voices, is without a doubt one of a national salvation, where the maxim is one of resistance: run the English out, win the war, liberate the territory. But which France is this exactly? What is this France that, at the beginning of the fifteenth century, has become something else, due to the complicated processes, an uncertain future, the justification for an English monarchy to claim legitimate sovereignty? To ensure that the principle of "kicking the English out of France" is in reality, in the conditions of the epoch, a maxim which constituted France herself, a choice across which France is defined as resistance and combat, is nothing like a substance of persistence. It seeks to traverse a national facade towards a still indistinct real.

That is why, as exaggerated as it may seem, de Gaulle's quasi-immediate identification with Joan is still legitimate in the sense that, for him too, France

doesn't pertain to the evil, inherent permanence of those who, somehow or other, went about their daily lives under the Nazis' supervision, but exclusively to those who sought as their immediate imperative to kick the Nazis and their collaborators out. Owing to the fact that Pétain's claim to Joan could only be an act of complete deception, as the German puppet who trapped France in an immobile terror. Let us say that Joan does not fall easily under the national predicate, that she is rather an event, a capacity for creation, than a result. She chose not to be what the era demanded her to be: someone who, far from the centres of decision, waits, utterly committed to her survival, to know on which side the balance falls. The nation is not for a delivered substance, a body which no war could master or symbolise. She is, like the resistance of the last war, a maxim which requires personal practice.

If we turn now to the people's Joan, the one who leaves her rural province towards the masters of the kingdom, we observe that she decisively chose not to be what was expected: a sort of people's prophet, elevating the peasants of her region, playing up a mystical trance or pretending to have the gift of divination, forming groups opposed to the regularity of the powers. She chose not to be a female Jacquou le Croquant, or an early Thomas Münzer. Yes, she came from the people, this is certain, but not within a purported semi-religious, semi-insurrectional guise, as our times have regularly portrayed her. She turns solitary towards the State, the king, the established powers. Her conviction, altogether incomparable, is that if she herself is about to reach the king, to talk to him, the course of events could change, that the State could give itself other principles of action. The classic figure of the prophetic disturbance, Joan substitutes an action in the direction of the State. She holds that all of this is possible, that no situation will bring about the impossibility of a resistance which conforms to the principles of the State. She believes that declaring her conviction to the king will inspire confidence in all. It is therefore unnecessary to oppose the State with the people. She seeks to make sure that a declaration from elsewhere, unplaceable and lateral, will make the State itself listen. The people have an aleatory capacity to prescribe to the State decisions which cohere to certain principles. And the people only exist in

the exercise of this capacity.

THE VOICES OF JOAN

What can be said of Joan the Christian, the Catholic? One must confess, frustrating the revision of the trial and the legitimate reputation of the infamous collaborator who holds the name of Bishop Cauchon, that it is not without admissible reasons that theologians could have declared that Joan was a heretic, even if they only accomplished, in doing so, the dirty work of the State. Because it has to be said that, at a time when Catholicism had the real body of a Church, Joan did not form the mediation of her belief through this body. Joan's authority comes only from herself, as with St Paul on the road to Damascus, where God gave the sign to her and to her only. Furthermore, it is based on this unwitting model of the Greek gods that both male and female saints prescribed her the task. Behold how the celestial authorities surprise us by involving themselves so intimately in ongoing national wars and are so resolutely on the side of France. These authorities' interests are, for reasons which are certainly their own, like Athena, Apollo or Hera, divorced from whether or not the Trojans or the Greeks win the battle.

What really signifies the voices of Joan? Simply that the patriotic imperative is unconditioned and self-sufficient, being of superior providence. And especially, that it does not infer the situation from itself, or the meanderings of realist politics, but from a pure subjectivation. And without a doubt what is possible which prescribes that voices must find their path in real practice, to that which provides lucidity, obstinacy, and the good sense of Joan. However, when this principle, under the form of the encounter with the voices, does not assume itself, its taking-place, it would seem as though Joan herself is powerless, as though she must obey. Just like the resistant fighters of the last war, questioned about their motivations, who nearly always responded that it is what they had to do, and that is all.

Joan's Catholicism is evidently not up for discussion. But at the same time, she

dwells in the intellectual resource of the epoch, for that is the public destiny of Joan, strangely reduced to a personal imperative, who gives form to the character of unlimited unconditionality of all true resistance.

And finally, who is Joan as a feminine figure? The motif of virginity seems to inscribe her, in the epoch, beneath the sign of Mary. For her contemporaries, she is the Maid. Partisans and adversaries cling to this predicate in a stupefying manner. One needed the physiological testimony of the matrons for the king to even take notice, and one must insinuate the doubt so that the English could create their propaganda, or so that Voltaire articulates anti-clericalism and obscenity. But at its heart, what does it matter to us? Virginity is here only the sign of a gap: one which shows that Joan asserts her decision not according to man, or from man, or from within some matrimonial delegation. She is a woman anterior to the stigmata of power that man can transmit to some women. She advances, as a young woman who, left alone and not transmitted, beneath the armour of an inaccessible and nevertheless decisive femininity. Without a doubt, only a woman whose beauty matched an interior armour had, in the conditions of the era, the authority to say in a loyal way, outside of all the rapine and of all the monstrosity, uniquely because it was what the era demanded: “Make war, not love.”

A patriot without a nation, a populist without an insurrection, a Catholic without the Church, a woman without man: this is how Joan traverses appearances and subtracts herself from all predicates.

The reactionary versions of her cult all consist in bringing to her, like heavy totems, or the equestrian statues of our cities, the predicates of which she was but their traversal. We hang on her shoulders, new chains for the new concealed pyres, a nationalism of substance and of race, a chosen people, a Catholicism of priests and submission, a femininity of sacredness.

It must be returned to its wanderings, to its universality, to the event without substance or realist condition for what she does, and where she dwells. From the

beginning of the fifteenth century, where the ordinary horrors had nothing to tell us, she is a truth. For in its heart, despite being particular and monotonous if seen as a moment in the time of men, it is here, that the exception dwells. She who knew, albeit in a single circumstance, not be reduced to the predicates of submission that her time imposed on her. Joan is entirely of her time, by all that she chose to be, and even more so by what she chose to not be, from that bloody and decayed beginning of the fifteenth century. But she is a truth, a truth for evermore. She is that which, for her barbaric epoch, merits the eternal return.

It is for this reason, she is greatly honoured, as Péguy says in his poem, "... by all those women and all those men who lived their human lives."

Badiou, Alain. "L'insoumission de Jeanne." *Esprit*, no. 238 (12) (1997): 26–33.