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Thinking through Philosophy: Alain Badiou and the Event of Transitory Citizenship

Introduction

Let us start out by recognizing that recent philosophical trends tend to place an unprecedented importance on language. Unprecedented in the sense that ever since Plato banished the poets from the ideal Republic right up until what Rorty calls the “linguistic turn”, language has never been as central to philosophical thought as it has in the recent past. Let us briefly, here at the outset, mention two of these major trends: After Wittgenstein, the analytic trend attempts to solve philosophy’s problems “by looking into the workings of our language, and that in such a way as to make us recognize these workings” (Wittgenstein, *Investigations* § 109). This analytic trend focuses on the clarity and appropriateness of linguistic propositions in their specific context. Accordingly, one must think of the multiplicity of linguistic propositions and their use in *language-games*. With the hermeneutic trend the understanding and interpretation of language takes an ontological turn with Martin Heidegger so that “language is the guardian of presencing, such that the latter’s radiance remains encrusted to . . . the saying” (Heidegger 424). Existence is requisitioned through the linguistic act.

Language has claimed a foundational role to philosophical thought, and rightly so considering the obvious fact that most thought attempts its expression in language at one point or another. On the other hand philosophy has incorporated a discourse of ends such that philosophy as philosophy itself is deemed to be over. Nietzsche's claim that God is dead put definitive end to all universal values and replaced them with the positing of self-created values through the will to power; Heidegger claimed the completion of metaphysics and proposed poetic language as both the way to and the locus of essential truths; Adorno spoke of the impossibility of poetry after Auschwitz; Lyotard the end of Meta Narratives; and Baudrillard the end of reality itself. The categories in which philosophy has historically claimed a vested interest are declared to be over by some of its greatest thinkers.

Out of these two proposals, on the one hand philosophy's devotion to language and on the other the widespread declaration of "the legitimate completion of philosophy" (Heidegger 435), we must ask the following question: is philosophy's devotion to language and its supposed demise related, or are these two trends but coincidences within some larger context?

In order to approach this question, perhaps we need to briefly explain what we mean by 'philosophy'. This immediately becomes very problematic. A philosophy can be a body of knowledge, a field of scholarship or an area study; *one's own* philosophy can be a worldview, a method of approaching questions, and a way to navigate through situations; *philosophy* can have a specific locus of concentration such as metaphysics, ethics, the political, etc. The point is not to attempt the presumptuous task of defining once and for all what is meant by the term philosophy – even if such a task were possible. Rather what we intend to show is that the task of philosophy is to provide the

possibility of a space where truths can emerge despite its discourse of ends and its devotion to language. The three general (and non-exhaustive) categories above – the study of knowledge, the method of study, and the category of study – all tend towards the establishment of such a space where and when the true task of philosophy can be affirmed.

I

It is one thing to conceptualize philosophical ideas and quite another to see them realized; philosophy based solely on one or the other is doomed to fail. In his *Theses on Feuerbach*, Marx condemns the way “reality . . . is conceived only in the form of the object or of *contemplation*, but not as *human sensuous activity*, [and] *practice*” (Marx 143). A completely conceptual, contemplative attitude, the type critiqued by Marx, leads to an idealization of the world that begets removed and ultimately naive understandings of human existence. “Philosophers,” Marx famously concludes, “have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it” (Marx 145). Philosophy’s true task then, is to think a space where it can be put into action, as praxis, so that it may manifest itself in the world as both thought and action instead of remaining in the non-physical space of pure thought, or conversely, existing in the realm of meaningless kinetics. Goethe already warned us, two centuries ago, of the “danger of elevating one’s self to the absolute, and sacrificing everything to the carrying out of an idea.” Thus the thinking of philosophy cannot simply serve as a means towards a practice, nor can practical actualization of a philosophical concept be entirely contingent on the philosophical thought. The complete sacrifice to either thought or action is tantamount to suicide.

Here we need to make a distinction between sacrifice and fidelity. The former is definite and final; it leaves no room for any further possibilities. It also assumes a loss in the sense that in the act of sacrifice something is forfeited for another cause; thought, for example, is often sacrificed to absolute action. In the act of sacrifice then, there is an exchange taking place between the thing given up (the loss) and the expected result – this economy we will call a negative economy because of the essential element of loss in the sacrificial exchange.

Fidelity on the other hand, establishes something much more than an economy – it establishes a non-binding bond. Fidelity enables one to actualize philosophical thought without having to engage in a negative economy of loss. Such an actualization of philosophy is the only true interruption of an economy. We can see that in contemporary society, the ancient ritual of sacrifice¹ can no longer serve as an interruption of the advanced economy of capital, for this economy is itself an economy of sacrifice, expenditure, waste and the wanton disposal and replacement of goods. The role of the sacrificial act as interruption has been reversed and it now plays an integral role in this economy as the enactment of its identifying structure. Put another way, sacrifice has been desacrilized and integrated into the economy so that its “supposed essential binding [is] projected indifferently onto the neutral surface of computation” (Badiou, *Manifesto* 55). This is what we can understand as nihilism or “the rupture of the traditional figure of the bond” (Badiou, *Manifesto* 55). As a completely subjective commitment to the philosophically thought space of possibility, fidelity is not only open

¹ In *The Gift* (New York: Routledge, 1990. Trans. Mary Douglas), anthropologist Marcel Mauss discusses the sacrificial potlatch ceremony of North-West American Native communities that served a dual purpose in the distribution and expenditure of goods. Georges Bataille, taking Mauss's study further, claimed that “the history of life on earth is mainly the effect of a wild exuberance” (33), luxury and sacrifice that “opens up a new possibility to life” (36).

to the emergence of the bond, but is able to escape any forced integration into the economy of loss and affirm the *latent possibilities in nihilism*.

The interruptive character of fidelity can only come about when we acknowledge that true philosophy oscillates between a space of action and the space of conceptualization, never dwelling completely in one or the other. “The specific role of philosophy,” writes Alain Badiou “is to propose a unified conceptual space” (Badiou, *Manifesto* 37) – a space where the “compossibility” of action and thought is opened up. The central term here is “compossibility”, for philosophy does not guarantee anything with absolute certainty; “it does not itself produce truths” (Badiou, *Manifesto* 35) but rather opens up the conceptual space and “offers a mode of access to . . . truths” (Badiou, *Manifesto* 37). Understood this way, fidelity to philosophy may seem empty since it is only an access to truths and not the locus of truths themselves. Thus, if philosophy thinks the *compossible* space where truths occur, it is towards these moments and events of truths that our fidelity must be geared; what Badiou terms “fidelity to the event.” However, since philosophy thinks the space for the compossibility of the event, how do we understand and complete this demand for fidelity to something that only exists in possibility? It seems wildly optimistic and verges on messianic utopianism – claims that are not entirely untrue.

Is “fidelity to the event” optimistic? Yes; or more precisely it is *affirmationist*. Utopian? Not entirely, at least not in the sense of what Russell Jacoby calls “blueprint” utopianism. Rather, “fidelity to the event” seems closer to what Jacoby calls “iconoclastic” utopianism; iconoclastic in the sense that the event “can neither be named nor represented by referring to the resources of the situation . . .” (Badiou, *Manifesto* 36). Thus, what we must understand in the phrase “fidelity to the event” is

that while the conditions leading up to the event can and must exist in actual philosophical thoughts and very real social situations, the event itself is an interruption of both the knowledge associated with these thoughts and the structure of these situations. “It makes a hole in sense, or makes an interruption in the circulation of sense” in any given society (Badiou, *Manifesto* 142). The conditions must be set even before the possibility of the event arises; philosophy thinks the space for these conditions. As with philosophy itself – oscillating between thought and practice – the necessary conditions for the event where truths emerge must also be set in both thought and practice.

While Badiou’s thinking denounces the idea of utopia, it only denounces a formal idea of utopia; formal in the sense of Jacoby’s blueprint utopianism. In *Picture Imperfect*, Jacoby provides a clear and concise account of the history of utopias and the debate between utopian ideologies and the possibility of their realization. He differentiates between two distinct methods of utopian thought. On the one hand, there are the utopias presented in works such as Thomas More’s *Utopia* and Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward*. These worlds offer “detailed information about the size, shape, diet and fashions of the future” (Jacoby xiv) in an attempt to set out a program for an ideal society. The iconoclastic utopians, on the other hand, offer no concrete details to grasp onto and are recognizable for “their resistance to representing the future” (Jacoby xvii). Jacoby believes that it is the iconoclastic utopians who “are essential to any effort to escape the spell of the quotidian” (Jacoby xvii).

We can identify striking similarities between iconoclastic utopian thought and Badiou’s philosophy of the event. In his *Definition of Philosophy* Badiou writes that “to force the naming of the unnameable breeds disaster” (Badiou, *Manifesto* 143); similarly,

Jacoby writes that the presentation of “detailed information about . . . the future incurs several risks” and “such plans often betray more a will for domination than for freedom” (Jacoby xv). Both thinkers are concerned with the same issue: the forced premature naming of the event (Badiou) and detailed programs for an ideal society (Jacoby) both entail a closing down and elimination of the possibilities of thought and freedom. Moreover, the question of fidelity can be demanded of iconoclastic utopians who “resist the modern seduction of images” (Jacoby xvi); sacrifice however can only fit into a world of designated plans and blueprints, where its requirements for something to *be* sacrificed and for something to be sacrificed *to* are met by such plans. Like the event “creating a hole in knowledge” (Badiou, *Manifesto* 37) and an interruption of the status quo, iconoclastic utopian thought refuses to use the tools and knowledge of the current society to plan and promote a future one. They do not ignore the current realities or trends of thought, but maintain a transitory relation between what is and what could be. They believe, along with Badiou, that one cannot use the language of today to describe a future tomorrow as blueprint utopians tend to do.

Any system of thought that tries to lay out exact rules and precise methods inherently contains a contradiction between the singular character of the philosophical thought and its actualization in the multiplicity of being. A being that is not One, but an ensemble that can neither be deconstructed and examined through its individual parts, nor totalized and considered as a whole (closed) system. This being must be considered for what it is: an ensemble of multiplicities that cannot be reduced to pure relativism. Philosophy must be synchronous with this multiplicity if it is to maintain the liberty to explore, discover and expand upon itself and the reality in which it is actualized. We can even say that synchronicity is a prerequisite for true actualization. This does not

mean that philosophy must prostrate itself to the conditions of its time. Nevertheless, we must recognize that without exploration and discovery, it is nothing but static knowledge, rigid and unable to adapt or change, and therefore meets the requirements for integration into a negative economy of sacrifice.

Curiously, we still use the term 'system of thought' which implies a notion of a framework; a notion necessary in order to provide a common ground for understanding and communication. The framework of the English language, for example, is a system that enables the communication and understanding of this essay. Without such a framework, communication becomes meaningless and all thought risks falling into misappropriation and misunderstanding.

However, when thinking is closed and final it becomes vulnerable to a much more devastating form of misappropriation and misunderstanding. This style of philosophy – one that presents Truth as a closed final statement – can only remain true to its contemporary time and does not acknowledge the fundamental multiplicity of being. In fact, when a closed and final philosophy is misappropriated and misunderstood it further proves the multiplicity of being for if being is a singular totality, singular and total philosophies would always and forever be appropriate. This is by no means an attempt to dismiss ideas that are not 'current', 'fresh' or 'contemporary'; these terms only serve a framework of linear, empirical time, but our very discussion of truths implies something "oriented not towards empirical time, but toward . . . the timeless essence of time" (Badiou, *Manifesto* 142). The very notion of finitude and closure are themselves products of empirical time and its corresponding closed systems of thought. Any philosophy that subscribes to Truth as closed and final will never be able to think "the timeless essence of time." It is for this reason that "a

philosophy is homogeneous to the stylistics of its epoch” but “the philosophical seizing of truths exposes [these truths] to eternity” (Badiou, *Manifesto* 142). Philosophy can only be synchronous with its time, but it must strive to think outside of that time. That the earth was the center of the universe before the Copernican revolution was an accepted truth even though we know this to be false today. This is by no means grounds to dismiss the validity of philosophy – nor to ignore its implications in the social structures – of pre-Copernican times.

Thus in order to avoid these dangerous pitfalls, philosophy must incorporate openness and infinity into its very structure while also retaining some sort of methodology or framework. The fact that humans are structuring, ordering beings is not the problem facing philosophy. Our natural tendency to structuralize the physical world and our thoughts so “that everything is bound up, proves that in terms of being it is [all] unbound” (Badiou, *Manifesto* 73). This does not necessarily exclude the possibility of universality, but merely reaffirms that “the reign of the multiple is the unfathomable depths of what is presented without exception” (Badiou, *Manifesto* 73). Philosophy needs to realize the state of things as “that of the multiple-without-One or of fragmentary, infinite and *indiscernible* totalities” (Badiou, *Manifesto* 58). It should not attempt to claim truths, but needs to think a space for the possibility of truths. In doing so it will have accepted the multiplicity of being by affirming it through the thought/practice oscillation instead of, for example, presenting itself as a dogma incommensurable with the physical world. This affirmation further opens up philosophy to more possibility and more potentiality – through synchronic infinity it is able to think the space for the event of truths without becoming sycophantic – openness engenders openness.

The four general conditions that make up the philosophical compossibility of truths for Alain Badiou are the matheme, the poem, political invention and love. Rather than restricting human behaviour and philosophical thought, for Badiou these general categories are the necessary and essential conditions for a free, experiencing, thinking human subject – the necessary conditions for what we will call citizenship. They are not restrictions on, but affirmations of the human spirit in all its potential.

The very fact that we use terms such as ‘human spirit’ or ‘citizenship’ presumes that there is something common to the multiplicity of being, something timeless that we can understand “when reading Sappho or Plato just as when reading Corneille or Becket” (Badiou, *Manifesto* 34). “The central category here” of what we understand as common “is *generic multiplicity*” (Badiou, *Manifesto* 104). But there is also an atemporal aspect presumed to what we want to call truth; the geocentric ‘truth’ prior to the Copernican revolution was a truth mired in the philosophy of its epoch. While philosophical thought must always be a product of its time, the event of truth made possible by philosophy never is. “Truth,” claims Badiou, “contains the following paradox: it is at once something new, hence something rare and exceptional, yet, touching at the very being of that of which it is a truth, it is also the most stable, the closest, ontologically speaking, to the initial state of things” (Badiou, *Manifesto* 36).

A closer look at these conditions is necessary if we are to understand Badiou’s concept of fidelity to the event which may lead us to a better understanding of citizenship. In order to fulfill philosophy’s transitory dwelling in both practice and concept, our examination will try to look at some material manifestations of the conditions as well as more abstract concepts in an effort to bring the two together. The matheme, while it exists as pure generic thought, has its manifestations in logic and

reason. The human act of naming and the ideals of poetic language are manifested primarily in the poem, but more generally in all linguistic communication. Political theory's application is found in human interaction and demands to be "addressed to everyone so that they all participate" (Badiou, *Manifesto* 142). Finally, the power of love between two transcends the subject/object and establishes an idea of universal ethics.

II

Following Aristotle's claim that "the beautiful is the main object of mathematical proofs" (*Metaphysics* M, 3, 30, 1078a34), Badiou's concept of the *matheme* deals with the ideals of form, symmetry and structure – classical notions of beauty. This idealization of mathematical structure works in two ways: on the one hand it provides an idea of pure egalitarianism void of all judgement and power as the completely free circulation of objectivity above all meaning because it has no "syntactical preamble or semantic interpretations" (Badiou, *Briefings* 116). On the other hand, and as a corollary to the first, the *matheme* provides a universal and infinite ensemble to being precisely because it is completely egalitarian and free from judgement. But because the *matheme* is essentially pure and "involves the void as well as Zero" (Badiou, *Briefings* 116), its infinite ensemble remains completely indiscernible. Taken from this standpoint, the *matheme* as pure emptiness with absolute zero value precedes any nihilistic empty notion of being since in its pure form it excludes subjectivity and thus cannot not even *think* meaning let alone provide the grounds to seed it. When "the question of mathematics as a thought is dealt with from the angle of object or objectivity" (Badiou, *Briefings* 45), it provides an open and infinite sphere for possible action.

The matheme, similar but not identical to philosophical thought, is neither purely transcendental nor completely sensible – “strictly speaking it has no being” (Badiou, *Briefings* 46). It neither exists in a latent form on its own nor separated absolutely from the sensible world; rather it “exists potentially in the sensible” (Badiou, *Briefings* 47). This potentiality *may* be recognized through conceptualization, but nevertheless still requires some form of expression. The latent potentiality of the matheme requests the human linguistic act in order to fulfill the multiplicity of being. The egalitarianism inherent in the matheme requests a political dimension open and available to all, and the social dimension of human beings requests an ethics of encounter. But before we coalesce the conditions Badiou claims are necessary and essential for free human thought, further discussion is required of the implications of the generic open value of the matheme and its transitory existence caught between the “the pure separate act . . . and actually existing things” (Badiou, *Briefings* 46).

The central question to this discussion then becomes: “In what sense can mathematical idealities be declared to exist?” (Badiou, *Briefings* 46) Or: How does one express the existence of the pure logic without slipping into misappropriation and misunderstanding? A pure empty matheme void of all meaning remains inexpressible on its own as nothingness with zero value – pure concept without actualization. The human act of linguistic expression perverts the purity of the logic-matheme since language approaches the situation with a pre-established system of meaning and structure. This form of linguistic expression “is about folding and unfolding [these systems] according to their singularity” (Badiou, *Briefings* 50) but can never be about the ensemble of the zero-void. The process of linguistic origami geared towards particular multiplicities lends itself to an opening-closing oscillation of thought, but the opening is

never complete since it works within limited singularities instead of the ensemble of existence.

The linguistic expression of the matheme posits values of definition and finitude onto a fundamentally open and infinite idea. The zero sum value of the matheme becomes flooded with a multiplicity of values completely foreign to itself. Instead of the purity of the matheme (along with the poetic act, the political act and the act of love) serving as a starting point for thought, “knowledge is being imitated for productive purposes” (Badiou, *Manifesto* 125). These posited values become new and falsified spaces, or “a fiction of knowledge” (Badiou, *Manifesto* 125) where the illusion of a One or of a totality is built. Philosophy itself cannot break through the illusion of the matheme or the illusion of language; nevertheless it must start out “first and foremost [as] a rupture with the narrative” (Badiou, *Manifesto* 127). Thus a philosophy that thinks within the confines of *a* multiple without thinking the space for the event of truths will never be a truly open philosophy – any thinking of possibility or potentiality it does will remain enclosed in a fictive and illusory bond. While the matheme provides logic and reason to human thought and practice, in itself it does not pose a problem. The problem is how to linguistically and communicatively come to terms with the expression of something as neutral and empty as the matheme without falling into its linguistic trap.

In modern times we have seen how the totalitarian tendency of reason and logic has created a “wholly enlightened earth . . . radiant with triumphant calamity” (Horkheimer and Adorno 1); it has led humanity to the point where its own extinction is a very possible threat. It is precisely the promise of equality and the matheme’s inherent zero value that propelled reason into the front seat of Enlightenment ideals by providing the illusion of an ontological *tabula rasa*. Who can blame its proponents? The

possibility of a free and equal society based on reason seemed to be an ideal replacement for other social structures. Instead of a hierarchical society based the divine right of monarchs for example, a society based on reason should provide equality and justice for all. With the reasoned purity of the matheme as the fundamental groundwork for human essence, every human being is seen on an equal plane; true openness exists. But here, once again, we face the problems of subjectively actualizing a purely objective conceptual thought. The various attempts, quasi-successes and all out failures of this actualization stand as testament to this problem.

The fundamental setback of a philosophy based solely on absolute logic stems from the matheme's void of meaning – it is an ethical zero, emptied of all significant value – which then imparts itself onto social relations and social structures. Any ethical encounter or empathy with the other – precisely because all individuals are seen as equal and empty objects instead of a multiplicity of subjects – becomes meaningless, if not impossible. Identity is levelled out into a totality of existence, since “for the Enlightenment, only what can be encompassed by unity has the status of an existent” (Horkheimer and Adorno, 4). Under this philosophy, every aspect of humanity and the universe as a whole is logically opened up in an effort to reveal its truth. The underlying hope is that once all the hidden secrets of the universe are openly known, all injustices and inequalities will be revealed as evil and unnatural, thereafter *truth, justice and equality* will reign.

Wittgenstein gave language the task of revealing the secrets of philosophy using a similar premise, such that “philosophical problems should *completely* disappear” (Wittgenstein, *Investigations* § 133). It is difficult to argue against the removal – or the attempted removal – of evils from human society or the resolution of philosophy's

greatest problems without subjecting one's self to harsh criticism. Should we not strive for some form of ideal society or try to "give philosophy peace so that it is no longer tormented by questions which bring *itself* into question" (Wittgenstein, *Investigations* § 133)? These argumentative safeguards become the banner under which the logic of the Enlightenment hid its destructive and annihilating character. But the argument against logic's devastating consequences was always countered with an argument from within the logical system itself; "Enlightenment is totalitarian" and "any intellectual resistance it encounters merely increases its strength" (Adorno and Horkheimer 3).

The very fact of the neutral zero value of the matheme and its manifestation as reason is its devastating danger – it is inherently annihilating when given free reign. Ever since the Enlightenment, prominent thought has pushed for the free reign and autonomy of reason, save for a few certain reactionary movements such as Romanticism. However the majority of these movements remain reactionary in the sense that they take their tools from within a system already at work. The moment when pure neutral reason is given free reign however, the universe and human society is thereafter considered completely neutral and devastatingly open – devastatingly open to any and all appropriation by those with the power and/or the ability to do so. As a consequence, these reactionary movements are incorporated into the system itself since the system they target is at the same time their source.

When left to itself as the fundamental understanding of the universe, the matheme and its manifestation as reason opens up all sides of existence to complete vulnerability. The pure emptiness of reason, in itself is void of all value and meaning, becomes a space for opportunity and power; a space where this power and opportunity can claim innocence above and beyond all judgement since they function under a

premise void of any judgeable substance. At this point existence becomes completely meaningless. The Enlightenment ideal of reason as a liberating, freeing force engendered an empty nihilistic existence where death, destruction and despair are mistakenly justified as natural elements of its system. Language was, and in some cases still is, seen as a possible counter to the fate of Enlightenment's devastation under the banner of logic.

Language began its ascent to the throne of philosophy with the Romantic poets' use of words as a means to express the inexpressible and relocate the essence of humanity from the matheme to language; with them it becomes a vehicle for truth. Hölderlin and Goethe were two of the great German Romantics. The latter opens his apologetic poem *To the Kind Reader* with the line "no one talks more than a Poet," whose subject choice and content are "all are fair when viewed in song;" the poet and language are not only raised above common communication, but are also granted abstention from judgement. This is the same abstention granted to the logic and reason of the matheme, but potentially much more powerful – and therefore potentially much more dangerous – thanks to the symbolic nature of language. Lamartine and Hugo were some of the French Romantic movement's leading figures; Hugo praises the power of the poet in *One day I saw, standing at the edge of the rising tide . . .*: "Poet, you do well . . . and you draw from the seas many things that are beneath the waves of the deep!" Here we see the poet as having access through language to places and ideas otherwise inaccessible, the same way the matheme was able to liberate and reveal the hidden essence in humanity through logical philosophical thought. In Britain, Blake and Wordsworth were writing about the poet-seer. Blake's introductory poem in *Songs of Experience* begins with the lines "hear the voice of the Bard/ who present, past and

future, sees.” The poet, through the tool of language, becomes an omniscient being and escapes the limitation of time similar to the way the matheme was the locus of a universal and atemporal truth.

From the Romantics on, the presence of language at the center of philosophical thought becomes more and more prominent, taking on a variety of forms. While contrary in theory to the Romantic poets, Wittgenstein sutured the neutral value of logic to the linguistic proposition. This may have temporarily freed language from misappropriation and attempted to clear away misunderstanding. It nevertheless left the ethical realm untouched since “to write or talk Ethics . . . [is] to run against the boundaries of language” (Wittgenstein, *Occasions* 44). When the matheme and language are sutured in this way, the universe of language and all it is concerned with – in this case everything – becomes objectified. Consequently, the Enlightenment value of the potential of every human subject is destroyed.

What distinguishes humans from all other sentient and non-sentient beings is their language, or more precisely the act of naming the world through language. This has always been the case across all cultures and throughout recorded history; it becomes a threat to human freedom and thought only with the advent of a society based on the logic of the matheme. We mentioned how the act of sacrifice can no longer be employed as an interruption of the economy under modern conditions and is deceived into playing an integral part in the economy. Language is subjected to a similar phenomenon. Once it claims to be the locus of truth, no matter the variety of expression, it limits its potential by joining the contest of Truth-seekers. It renounces its fundamental multiple being and subscribes to a quest for totality. Whether or not language can access this totality is beside the point – once it admits its purpose as such,

its open and infinite credibility it lost forever. In an attempt to redeem itself, language becomes the focus of an ontological reassurance in a world ruled by logic that employs humans, and their language, as puppets on the world stage. To this end, language plays a Janus-faced role as both a tool for controlling the world through the linguistic act of naming and as the basic element for human interaction. With humans as the agents for the power of naming, the neutral nature of the matheme has both the justification and the means for the annihilation and the destruction of meaning in an effort to transform everything into its likeness – that is, essentially nothing.

This nothingness is what the Romantic poets were rebelling against. For them, truth is not found through logic or reason, but could be reached – at least in theory – through the idealized poetic language of human experience. Generally speaking, there exists a poetic truth that cannot be attained by objectively reasoning one's way to it. This Romantic ideal was an attempt at "opposing the truth of the poem to the latent nihilism of the matheme" (Badiou, *Manifesto* 75). What they attempted to show is that "an experience . . . subtracted from objectivity and subjectivity," – the categories initially required by the matheme for its totalitarian manifestation – "does exist" (Badiou, *Manifesto* 73).

Heidegger picks up on this Romantic ideal, especially in his study of Hölderlin. It could be said that, following Nietzsche, Heidegger was responding to the technological advances of the matheme's nihilism in the same manner (although much more exhaustively and convincingly) as the Romantics were to the Enlightenment. However, Heidegger was privy to witnessing the ramifications of these technological advances – ramifications that were destroying or had already destroyed any meaningful foundation to human existence. This extreme nihilism, of which the Romantics only saw

the beginning, lead Heidegger to declare that “in the essence of language, language is grasped conceptually, but it is caught in the grip of something other than itself” (Heidegger 406). The effect of technology’s nihilism on Heidegger’s thought drew him to reevaluate the human as an ontologically questioning being to try to escape this grip and get to the essence of language.

The very act of raising the ontological question undermines the whole Enlightenment project; a project that was riding the wave of reason surged by the matheme’s egalitarian promise to mould every human being into a human Subject. The question of being for Enlightenment logic and the matheme was as void as the logic and the matheme itself. Thus to raise the ontological question of essence assumes that there is something beneath the empty surface of the matheme. This assumption discredits the whole Enlightenment project immediately, but places an even greater burden on language, a burden that it has to try to shoulder on its own.

Although Heidegger was not the only one to approach the question of logic, technology and its nihilistic tendencies, he revived the ontological question within the space of the poem. The Romantic search for truth through language culminates with Heidegger. We must now look into what lends poetic language the capacity to approach the question of being and the ability to overcome the latent nihilism of the matheme.

It is important to distinguish between human language in general and the language of poetry. For although “the essence of man consists in language” (Heidegger 398), if one tries to approach language through a series of truthful propositions stemming directly out of the pure thought of the matheme, one inevitably fails. Such an

approach “will remain a concatenation of unverified and scientifically unverifiable claims” (Heidegger 397). In other words, if one tries to approach the essence of language from without, through a logical encyclopaedic mindset, one has failed from the start. This is the Enlightenment’s powerful, self-serving ruse that Heidegger wanted to abandon and subvert on his way to language in language; he realized that it can only be approached from within. His romanticism and hellenophilia both shine through when he lays bare the reasons why language cannot be approached objectively through reason but must be sought after in itself.

“Greek civilization” Heidegger writes in *The Way to Language*, “experiences the sign on the basis of a showing, the sign having been coined by showing, for showing” (Heidegger 401); this concept of the genesis of the sign is a self-genesis by the very act of showing itself. But Greek civilization, through Plato’s doctrine of the Forms, also sets the grounds for metaphysics, which transforms the experience of the sign into an experience of representation. Thus Heidegger continues by pointing out that “from the Hellenistic period onward . . . the sign comes to be an instrument for designation” (Heidegger 401). The unity of the sign and its showing has been severed; it becomes representational of things instead of letting “something appear”. This shift is the beginning of rational language – a language based on the *matheme* – as a closed system of representation incapable of opening to the appearance of things. Instead of potentializing the free thinking individual, its main objective is “enframing” whereby humans are “moulded into the technical-calculative creature[s]” (Heidegger 421) that are as devoid of meaning and ethics as the *matheme*.

In the place of appearance, this language based on the *matheme* designates objects from behind the closed wall of the logical proposition. Poetry is able to break

down this wall by ignoring the conventional subject/object distinction and by gesturing towards an essential understanding of things as a way in which “language essentially unfolds as language” (Heidegger 405). As Hölderlin writes, it is not through the act of designation that “the thing that is man’s care and skill” appears and leads the way to truth, but through “something else [that] is put in the poet’s trust and care to serve” (Hölderlin 153). This “something else” is language itself, but understood within this idea is a truth that cannot be designated by any other form of expression, but only shown to come into being through itself. Thus any understanding of human essence or truth must come out of language as language and not be separated through explanation from its ontological questioning. Since in the act of “explaining language as this or that” we are in fact “fleeing from it” (Heidegger 413) and from the essence of things, it becomes clear that we cannot speak *of* things without first understanding their essence through the linguistic saying as naming/ showing. We can see here how language has become the locus of philosophy such that “every thinking . . . is a poetizing, and all poetry a thinking” (Heidegger 425).

III

Our opening statement that philosophy has devoted itself to language attains its fulfilment, by way of a reaction to the linguistic manifestation of the *matheme*, and culminates with Heidegger. Yet how can Badiou still demand of philosophy its thinking task after these developments? We must take a closer look at the ontological implications of his notion of the event.

In the language essay, Heidegger writes that “even when the showing is accomplished by means of our saying, such showing or referring is preceded by a

thing's letting itself be shown" (Heidegger 410). Thus we can say that the thing precedes language; the event precedes the naming. Later on however, Heidegger writes that "the saying is by no means the supplementary linguistic expression of what shines forth; rather, all shining and fading depend on the saying that shows" (Heidegger 414), which seems to suggest that language precedes the thing; the naming precedes the event. Following these two statements we can say that there is a paradox inherent to language, to the event of truths and to their relationship. Instead of saying that the appearance of a thing is contingent on the naming, or conversely that naming must precede the thing's appearance, can we say that it is one simultaneous event?

If we do this we must also realize that at this point Badiou's and Heidegger's thoughts diverge. Heidegger states that the appearance of a thing "can be represented neither as an event nor as a happening" (Heidegger 415), whereas for Badiou, the very task of philosophy is to think the space for the possibility of the event of truths. If "philosophy is homogeneous with the stylistics of its epoch" (Badiou, *Manifesto* 142) then Heidegger's thought can be recognized as the culmination of philosophy's devotion to language – the culmination of an epoch that sprouted with Romantic ideals of language. However that "Age of the Poets, is *completed*" (Badiou, *Manifesto* 71) and a contemporary relationship between philosophy and language is required – a new poetry? – If universal and atemporal truths are to be sought; our notion of citizenship rests on fundamental, objective truth.

Contrary to the other discourses of ends we mentioned at the outset, Badiou realizes that "the end . . . [of the age of poets] . . . is cut from the same cloth" as the age itself (Badiou, *Manifesto* 31). In other words, this "completion" is not so much a closure that leads towards resignation as it is an affirmation of an opened possibility. In this

sense, Adorno's claim of the impossibility to write poetry after Auschwitz can also be seen as an affirmation in an age of nihilism. Even Lyotard hints at some optimism in the nihilism of ends when he says that "although the end is naively presented as a deadline, thought immediately clears that limit in order to ensure that a *beyond* breaking with the *before* is already present" (Lyotard, 2). Thus the linguistic turn that has become a linguistic trap has not annihilated all possibilities of thought, but rather opens up thought to more possibility *if philosophy is up to taking on the task*. The question is not *how do we go on within the nihilistic discourse of ends* but rather "what has happened to philosophy for it to refuse with a shudder the liberty and strength a desacrilizing epoch offered it" (Badiou, *Manifesto* 59)?

We mentioned at the outset that fidelity to the event establishes a non-binding bond as opposed to the loss of sacrifice. It is to this distinction that we can return, now that we have looked into the roles and shortcomings of a philosophy completely devoted to either the *matheme* or to language. Philosophy, and all of thought, needs to come to terms with the way things are in the world. A world where the economy of capital is the foundational structure of every relationship, so much so that *every* aspect of life has been forced to adapt to its system. We will maintain that this essential disaster, this very human disaster, is a result of philosophy's complete devotion to one locus of thought. Even fundamental dialectical relationships have been forced to submit to an economy of loss modeled on the current economy of capital. The dialectical exchange is unable to avoid infiltration by and eventual submission to capital since, by its nature, tries to deal with and experience the elements of existence. Yet nothing can approach this economy of loss without being transformed into one of its agents. This threatens the very notion of citizenship and drastically reduces ant hope for the true

democratic process to prattle. This economy shares this same quality with the matheme: it is completely open to infinite multiplicity, but through its act of being, reduces this multiplicity to sameness. The deterioration of the dialectical exchange is obvious when we observe dialogue in the political arena where political 'debates' resemble isolated monologues coming from a variety of sources all delivering the same message. In order to develop a notion of citizenship, the generic multiplicity of capital must be *affirmed* and *transcended*.

We by no means want to excuse the dominant economy of capital and take a Panglossian stance to the state of the world. In fact we would like to take on quite the opposite. The fact that logic and language have both failed as loci for truth does not call for their complete dismissal from thought. Furthermore, even though Marx denounced passive philosophical contemplation, we cannot understand this as demand for the complete eviction of philosophy from life. History tells us of the political dangers associated with a nihilistic rejection of the past's brilliant ideas. The fact that the dialectical exchange is in a state of crisis and seems to be worsening the situation by serving as a banner for propaganda – the same way 'democracy' is used as a pretty outfit for the deformed ideologies performing on the Western stage – does not call for a rejection of it either.

What does need to be dismissed though, are the vacuous competitive games between linguists, scientists and dialecticians who all claim to have a singular, isolated solution for the world's problems. Meanwhile, instead of providing a space for thinking, philosophy has "decided to *plead guilty*" (Badiou, *Manifesto* 28) and has suffered the consequences: its own execution. Philosophy sacrificed itself to logic, then to language and now to itself by taking on the burden, alone, of a society in despair.

Rather than affirming this desperation as an actual state of affairs and devoting itself to its amelioration, it has identified itself with the deterioration of things and has become the cozy bedfellow of a nihilistic way of thinking unable to develop any critical potentiality.

Philosophy “has not cared to recognize in a straightforward way the absoluteness of the multiple and the non-being of the bond” (Badiou, *Manifesto* 58). In the areas where it does still linger and subsist it seems pastoral and nostalgic, or isolated, logical and cold; in other words it is still under the mentality of sacrifice to some by-gone bond. *If* philosophy were to organize itself around the notion of fidelity, thus establishing a transient bond – or a non-binding-bond – the potential and possibility of the human spirit could be renewed. With the notion of the sacrificial bond and the economy of loss revealed as fictions, philosophy is able to take up its true task. Put another way: is the physical enslavement of millions of human beings to the mechanistic apparatus of production, the incomprehensible slaughter of tens of millions more in WWI and WWII, the destruction and elimination of moral values and ethical relations to the other, and the mental and spiritual enslavement of billions of humans to the technological apparatus of information, philosophy’s *fault*? We must disagree, yet for some reason philosophy has taken the blame and instead of affirming its fidelity, has sacrificed itself.

“It would be to concede a strange victory” to these disparaging events in recent history “to declare outright that they had managed to introduce the unthinkable into thought and so terminated” (Badiou, *Manifesto* 31) the very exercise of philosophy. Rather than accepting defeat, philosophy must “think over and above Capital” as the

contemporary foundation of societal structure and use “as a *departure point* what [Capital] has revealed: Being is essentially multiple” (Badiou, *Manifesto* 57).

In a sense, this is a demand for philosophy to transcend what is, without succumbing to escapism. While it cannot afford to devote itself to language or the *matheme*, it nevertheless requires both in order to set the conditions for the event of truths; conditions that require affirmation in physical presence. Even though, through these conditions, “philosophy simply puts everything before us, and neither explains nor deduces anything” (Wittgenstein, *Investigations* § 126), it does not simply “shew the fly the way out of the fly-bottle” (Wittgenstein, *Investigations* § 309). Rather, philosophy must display an open fidelity to the event which is neither an event of liberation (which would assume something as trapped), nor an awaited event (which would assume something known). For what remains at the heart of philosophy, beyond the logic of the *matheme* or the essence of poetic language “is a lack, a hole” (Badiou, *Manifesto* 126).

The event is a supplement to the hole. It receives its affirmation through the naming of an additional multiplicity heretofore unnamed. So while language *may be* “the guardian of presencing,” such a presencing cannot “remain encrusted to the saying” (Heidegger, 424). Such a bond would suture possibility and potential to something pre-existing and pre-known, thereby establishing a continuum process within a closed total system. The point, however, is to break through the illusion of totality. It is true that “in the essence of language a multiplicity of elements and relations shows itself” (Heidegger 407), but the system of language conceives the multiplicity within a totality. Rather than the elements and relations of existence being contingent on language, their events must requisition language into their service. Here we see the relation of the *matheme* and language composing the coming-into-being of

the event; the matheme's void and linguistic affirmation, together, provide the possibility for a) the space for recognition of, and b) the affirmation of the event. The event precedes.

Thus "while philosophy is all about identifying what real ontology is in an endlessly reviewed process, it is also the general theory of the event" (Badiou, *Briefings* 60). Citizenship, as the political aspect of being human, can now be seen as an event. This seems to be the only philosophy capable of imagining a viable notion of citizenship within current society. While it is important to "keep the multiplicities of language-games in view" (Wittgenstein, *Investigations* § 24), it cannot be the only view, for these multiplicities must be extended beyond what is. In order to function in a world that claims to be open to multiplicity yet encloses everything in a totality, one needs to conceive of a philosophy of transitory being of multiplicity *and* infinity; an affirmation of the subject and a fidelity to the event, without falling back into dependence on, nor constructing definite representations of either one.

We can conclude with some hopeful nihilism from Beckett:

my peace is there is the receding mist
when I may cease from treading these long shifting thresholds
and live the space of a door
that opens and shuts (Beckett 39)

Aristotle. *Metaphysics*.

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