

## BOOK REVIEW

### ‘A FIXED POINT, A POINT OF INTERRUPTION’

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**Alain Badiou, *Infinite Thought: Truth and the Return to Philosophy*, ed. and trans. Justin Clemens and Oliver Feltham, New Edition, London, Continuum, 2005. ISBN: 0826479294.**

*Infinite Thought* collects a series of essays by Alain Badiou, drawn from diverse sources: three of the essays are original translations of conference papers given in Australia in 1999, and not available elsewhere: these texts are supplemented with a number of uncollected papers of a similar character which appeared in French or in translation during the same time period, and also with extracts from books as yet unavailable in English (two chapters from *Conditions*, 1992, and one from *Un désastre obscur*, 1998). A substantial introductory essay by the editors and translators, Justin Clemens and Oliver Feltham, provides a very accessible introduction to the underlying premises of Badiou’s thought, as set out in his formidable treatise, *Being and Event* (1988).

The editors have selected and arranged the essays in order to represent the spectrum of Badiou’s interests: the two opening papers present his claim for a renewal of philosophy and for the category of truth, and subsequent chapters represent his interventions in psychoanalysis, politics, art and cinema. The brevity and directness of the texts make the book into a very useful introductory volume. For the initiate, the contrast of disparate texts is likely to produce a reading experience quite different from that which one has with the major works, such as *Being and Event* or the book on Saint Paul. In these works, the reader is wholly taken in charge by a rigorous and commanding chain of argument: here, one has rather the sense of observing the different facets of Badiou’s method at work, and the diversity of subjects and contexts produces an effect of montage, so that one has constantly to rediscover one’s orientation in the intervals between

the highly focused but discontinuous individual statements.

The opening text ‘Philosophy and Desire’ represents the essential gesture of Badiou’s thought—a return to a thinking guided by the categories of truth and universality. This ‘return to philosophy’ is placed in opposition to the dominant trends in contemporary philosophy, here analysed in terms of three principal orientations: the hermeneutic philosophy of Heidegger and Gadamer, the analytic school of Wittgenstein and Carnap and the post-modernism of Derrida and Lyotard. The common flaw of these orientations is that ‘they are too strongly committed to the polyvalence of meaning and to the plurality of languages’ (IT 37). Contemporary philosophy has its point of convergence in the privilege accorded to the themes of language and meaning and in the replacement or subordination of the category of truth.

One can question if this is in fact an accurate representation, at least with respect to Heidegger: the fact that his fundamental ontology announces itself as a hermeneutics does not necessarily allow it to be summed up as an enterprise engaged in deciphering meaning:<sup>1</sup> and it is disconcerting to see his thought included as part of a philosophical conjuncture characterized by the perception that ‘the metaphysics of truth has become impossible’ (IT 34): one of Heidegger’s major texts is, after all, entitled ‘On the Essence of Truth’. But it is no doubt true to say that, under a variety of forms, the topics of language and meaning have occupied a central place in recent philosophical thought, and that the heightened concern with linguistic mediation has diminished the force of the philosophical claim for universality.

In ‘Philosophy and Desire’, Badiou proposes that, in the interest of universality, philosophy ‘has to establish a fixed point within discourse, a point of interruption, a point of discontinuity, an unconditional point’ (IT 38). The flaw of contemporary philosophy, with its emphasis on the conditionedness of thought by language, is that it does not provide sufficient force of rupture to extract itself from the plurality of languages and the circulation of meaning. As a result, it is condemned to merely reflect the world to which it belongs: that is, the contemporary world dominated by the flow of capital, information and images—by ‘the essential illogicism of mass communications’ (IT 36).

The determination of the philosophical gesture as an interruption recurs in the collection in a variety of forms. I would like to indicate this by briefly considering two further passages in which the same figure appears. I turn first to ‘The Definition of Philosophy’ the final essay of the collection. This paper is taken from the book *Conditions*, and one recognizes in it a rather different style to the conference papers, more formal and precise in its terms, more severe and economic in its explanation. In reading it one has perforce to realize the need for further study—at the very least, of the rest of the

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1. ‘The hermeneutic orientation assigns philosophy the aim of deciphering the meaning of being, the meaning of being in-the-world, and its central concept is that of interpretation. There are statements, acts, writings, and configurations whose meaning is obscure, latent, hidden or forgotten. Philosophy must be provided with a method of interpretation that will serve clarify this obscurity, and bring forth from it an authentic meaning, a meaning which would be the figure of our destiny in relation to the destiny of being itself’ (IT 32). The term ‘meaning’ is over-charged here to the point where it is no longer discernable what its ‘meaning’ is.

book from which it comes—in order to obtain an adequate grasp of its formulations; its placement at the conclusion of the volume, comes as a sobering reminder of the limitations of this collection, its intended status as a gateway work. Nonetheless, it contains assertions which throw further light on terms used in the much more accessible statement of position in ‘Philosophy and Desire’.

For Badiou, philosophy does not produce truths by itself. Its task is solely to seize the truths that emerge from its conditions in the domains of science, politics, art, and love. These are the four ‘truth procedures’, under which Badiou articulates the dimensions of human possibility, inasmuch as it generates truths.<sup>2</sup> The work of philosophy, as we learn in ‘The Definition of Philosophy’, consists in the affirmation of the truths discovered within these ‘procedures’, in the light of its own thesis of universality. From this standpoint, philosophy takes hold of truths produced within the truth-procedures and ‘exposes them to eternity’ (IT 125):

The act of seizure, such as an eternity orientates it, tears truths from the straightjacket of sense: it separates them from the law of the world. Philosophy is subtractive, in that it makes a hole in sense, or interrupts—such that all the truths may be said together—the circulation of sense (IT 125).

The definition of philosophy is sketched out by its contrast with a general order, which is here referred to as ‘the law of the world’ and as ‘sense’. The advent of philosophy punctures the continuity of a circulation of meaning, which appears as constraining (it is a ‘straightjacket’). The ‘subtractive’ effect of philosophy, the ‘hole’ that it makes in ‘sense’, is a liberation: it opens truths produced under temporal and historical conditions to a dimension in which they can assume their potential universality.

Let us compare this passage with a second text (also taken from *Conditions*) entitled ‘Philosophy and Art’. Here as is recurrently the case throughout Badiou’s work, the intent is to express the difference of his vision of philosophy from that of Heidegger—in this context, specifically from Heidegger’s invocation of poetry and art as sites of philosophical truth. For Badiou, the poetic thought of the Pre-Socratics, to which Heidegger devotes a constant work of exegesis, is not yet philosophy. ‘For every truth that accepts its dependence in regard to narrative and revelation is still detained in mystery: philosophy exists solely through its desire to tear the latter’s veil’ (IT 70); and a little later: ‘Philosophy began in Greece because there alone the matheme allowed an interruption of the sacral exercise of validation by narrative’ (IT 71). Again we have here philosophy as a violent movement (a tearing of the veil), and as an ‘interruption’: but now the continuity that is interrupted is not ‘sense’ and the conditions of ‘the world’ (temporal experience) as in the previous text, but rather the auratic authority of poetry, of thought in the cloak of mystery and revelation.<sup>3</sup>

2. On these basic premises, see the editors’ introduction to *Infinite Thought*, especially pp. 18–25.

3. Later in the same text, the separation that philosophy has to take in relation to the poem is said to have its parallel in relation to each of the truth-procedures: the advent of philosophical thought signifies a deposition of sense and of enjoyment from all its conditions (poetry, mathematics, love, political realities): for this reason, philosophy cannot be understood as an *interpretation* of truth-producing activities (IT 76–79). This

The task of philosophy, as presented in ‘Philosophy and Desire’, presents us with a third version of the operation. The category of truth is required in order that philosophy can ‘propose a principle of interruption’ to interrupt the ‘endless regime of circulation’ (IT 36). In this case, however, the endless regime of circulation refers to the menacing and inconsistent world of the media and the politics of money and force: a point of interruption is required in order that thought can extract itself from ‘a world subordinated to the merchandizing of money and information’, a world which is ‘an anarchy of more or less coded fluxes, wherein money, products and images are exchanged’ (IT 36).

In each of the three cases philosophy is the interruption of a continuity: and yet the situations themselves correspond to different orders of thought: in the first case, the philosophical apprehension of truth contains, as part of its paradigm, the interruption of the circulation of the phenomenal world (of time and sense): in the second case, the Greek origin of philosophy is narrated as the interruption of the aura of the poem, a unique (and essentially positive) entity within the world: in the third case, philosophy signifies the demand for a point of exteriority to a specific and negative total historical situation. It should be mentioned that one of the most impressive aspects of this collection—one not at all diminished by its fragmentary character—is its denunciation of this total situation—that is, of ‘the world as it is’ (IT 41), and the manner in which this denunciation is brought so directly into relation to the demand of philosophical thought (see, in this collection, in addition to ‘Philosophy and Desire’, the texts ‘Philosophy and Politics’ and ‘Philosophy and the War on Terrorism’).

At the beginning of ‘The Desire for Philosophy’, Badiou writes that ‘there is no philosophy without the discontent of thinking in its confrontation with the world as it is’ (IT 29). This statement takes on a peculiar sense in the light of the passages we have compared: for it is not perhaps necessary that the continuity of the temporal world, or the power of the poem need in themselves give rise to any discontent: on the contrary, it seems quite thinkable that they should support an order of happiness, unmarked by the subtraction of philosophy. This would tend to support the sense that one has in reading ‘Philosophy and Desire’ that universality is not proposed as a good in itself (as the recovery of the relation to being is in Heidegger), but rather something that is demanded ‘by the world as it is’. In reading this volume, it is this dimension of Badiou’s thought which constantly strikes one: its double conditioning, by the internal demands of a formal mode of thought (such as a thinking of being, taking its point of reference from set theory) and by the demands issuing from the analysis of the present-day political situation.

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specification is again intended to mark the distance from Heidegger’s work, which Badiou seeks to grasp and contain in the terms of its hermeneutic dimension.