The Denial of (Greek) Thought: Alain Badiou

The ‘least-worst signifier’

For a number of seemingly very cogent reasons, one might have assumed that an analysis of that philosophical and literary-theoretical tradition in which a variously defined literature is privileged above all other modes of discourse for what is taken to be its powers of resistance to a variously defined nihilism would not include Alain Badiou other than as the most patent of counter-examples; that is to say, as a philosopher whose entire project may be summed up as the attempt to break completely with, and indeed to refute, the philosophical tradition stemming from Nietzsche and passing by way of Heidegger, Blanchot, Derrida, and Deleuze, among others. As Badiou observes in Deleuze: The Clamor of Being (1997), this Nietzschean tradition relies upon the notion of ‘Platonism’, against which it directs all its force, the ‘crucial point’ of intersection between Deleuze and Heidegger being their ‘ineluctable devaluation of Plato – which both get from Nietzsche’ (Badiou 1999a: 101). At the heart of this Platonism would lie the radical distinction between logos and mythos, or between philosophy and what will come to be thought as literature, and the absolute privilege accorded to the former over the latter. It is on the impossibility of any such watertight distinction between philosophy and literature that this Nietzschean tradition repeatedly insists, and, as we have seen, it does so precisely in the interests of a resistance to nihilism.

According to Badiou, the refutation of this entire Nietzschean (or anti-Platonic) tradition is necessary precisely because the concept of Platonism upon which that tradition relies is in fact ‘the great fallacious construction of modernity and postmodernity alike’ (Badiou 1999a: 102). Deploying – without naming his source for – one of the key terms to have emerged from within the tradition that he is challenging,
Badiou calls for the ‘deconstruction’ of the concept of Platonism (Badiou 1999a: 101). By deconstruction, however, Badiou means neither a Heideggerian *Abbau* nor a Derridean operation of reversal and displacement, but rather the exposure of this ‘construction’ in its falsity. For Badiou, the deconstruction of the concept of Platonism is the necessary first step in a ‘return to Plato’ that would not only reinstate a clear theoretical distinction between philosophy and literature, but also limit the privilege accorded to the latter. Indeed, Badiou’s proposed mathematical ontology, as elaborated in *Being and Event* (1988), would free philosophy from what he takes to be its epochal suturing to the poem (*poème*). According to Badiou, this suture finds its first full expression in Nietzsche and its culmination in Heidegger as the relation between thinking (*Denken*) and poeticizing (*Dichten*), and constitutes what in his *Manifesto for Philosophy* (1989) he terms the ‘age of the poets’. As Badiou sees it, the first of the poets to which philosophy has been sutured is Friedrich Hölderlin and the last Paul Celan, in whose works – and, above all, in the poem ‘Todtnauberg’, in *Lichtzwang* (1970) – one finds the dismissal of philosophy (that is, of Heidegger) by poetry. With its desaturing from the poem, philosophy would once again be governed by the concept, its labour that of conceptualization, its task the construction of a space for those truths that are produced by the four truth-processes (*processus de vérité*) or conditions of philosophy, namely science, politics, love, and art.

For all his commitment to a return to Plato and a freeing of philosophy from its suturing to the literary in the form of the poem, however, Badiou nonetheless continues to share with the philosophical tradition from which he would break a reliance upon the concept of nihilism, which he in his turn finds it necessary both to redetermine and to redeploy as what in the *Manifesto* he terms a ‘least-worst signifier’ (*signifiant bouche-trou*) (Badiou 1999b: 58). That he attempts to redetermine nihilism in a non-Nietzschean manner is certainly not enough to ensure an effective break with the philosophical (or, as he sees it, anti-philosophical or sophistic) tradition that he aims to submit to refuting critique. For, as we have seen throughout this book, it is precisely such an attempt to think nihilism beyond Nietzsche, and even to redetermine the concept of nihilism against Nietzsche, that characterizes each and every major intervention in the field, from Heidegger’s to Agamben’s. Furthermore, if Badiou seeks to limit, without simply negating, the privilege accorded to the literary, this privilege will remain tied in Badiou’s own work to the thinking of a necessary resistance to nihilism. Indeed, with Badiou – and for reasons that have everything to do with the radicality of the