

'Ours is not a terrible situation' - Alain Badiou and Simon Critchley at Labyrinth Books, NY, March 6, 2006

Dorothea von Moltke: It is truly a great pleasure to be able to introduce to you tonight Alain Badiou and Simon Critchley, eminent philosophers both and both with a host of crucial works, which I will not attempt to catalog here. Suffice it to say that – in and through philosophy – the work of both also centrally engages politics as well as literature. Alain Badiou has been teaching at the Ecole Normale Supérieure since 1999. He was very much influenced by the events, I should say the event, of 1968 and against the grain of widespread repudiations by his own generation has remained true to its legacies. He is actively involved with L'Organisation Politique, a post-party organization concerned with direct popular intervention in the political sphere. He is also the author of several novels and plays. Simon Critchley teaches philosophy at the New School for Social Research and at the University of Essex and is author of many books, most recently *Things Merely Are* and *Infinitely Demanding* is forthcoming from Verso. But we are here to discuss and celebrate the newly translated, seminal work by Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*. In their press materials for this book, Continuum Publishers present Badiou as France's most important living philosopher and *Being and Event* as "accessible and actually a pleasure to read". The former claim is patently true; the second in my view bears some qualification: as most great works of philosophy, it abundantly rewards the considerable effort of reading it.

One partial way to characterize the 20th century in philosophy and in the sciences is in a drive towards formalization in which mathematics has played a significant role as both model and method. Another preoccupation has been the persistent question of ontology or what the Being of beings is. Alain's Badiou's work makes a strong claim for seeing these movements as complimentary – and by extension states, in fact, the "nullity of the opposition between analytic thought and continental philosophy". His concepts of the void, the multiple, the event, and truth lie at the core of this claim and will, I am sure, be part of tonight's conversation.

I invited Alain Badiou to come to Labyrinth with high hopes and low expectations that he might be willing and able to accept this invitation and trust that he knows what a very great honor it is to have him with us. I then suggested to him perhaps to ask Simon

Critchley to join us for a discussion of his work. I was certain that this would make for a meaningful dialogue. But I wondered to myself what they each might think of the idea since an important part of Simon Critchley's work has been devoted to articulating and defending an ethics in relation to Levinas and Derrida of which Alain Badiou in turn has offered a very forceful critique. – only to be told by each of them and whole-heartedly that they are friends and would be delighted. So in thinking about some of the points of agreement within their possible disagreements, I am going to speculate that – alongside the political where they share an insistence on the need for radical politics and new political subjectivities or forms of political engagement – I will speculate that alongside this important field, Beckett, too, is not an unimportant common ground. Badiou and Critchley are two of the most subtle readers of Beckett that I have come across. Both, moreover, read Beckett *against* his reception in the nihilist tradition and *for* a residual kind of affirmation : "a few possibles, in the plural -- a few possibilities other than what we are told is possible," as Badiou has said. And so I would like to turn the conversation over to Alain and Simon with a quote from *The Unnamable*, hoping that we will not only be proceeding by 'aporia pure and simple' but rather in a way characteristic of Beckett and, perhaps too of Badiou. "One starts things moving without a thought of how to stop them. In order to speak. One starts speaking as if it were possible to stop at will. It is better so... In the frenzy of utterance the concern with truth. Hence the interest in a possible deliverance by means of encounter." Please join me in welcoming Alain Badiou and Simon Critchley.

Simon Critchley: "Thank you, Dorothea, and thank you to Labyrinth Books. I am going to introduce Alain Badiou, philosopher..."

Alain Badiou: yes (laughter)

S: ... dramatist, novelist, militant. And we are here to celebrate, to mark the long awaited translation into English of *L'être et L'événement*, which appeared in 1988 in French and was translated, we should mention, by Oliver Feltham, an Australian philosopher working in Paris, who has completed this enormous work. And that brings me to my questions. I will say a few words and then I'll tell you the questions. I'm going to raise 4 questions. I've told Alain what they are. Our plan is very simple so we'll see what happens. But first I want to

talk about the reception of Alain's work a little bit. Because the reception in the US is I think a little behind the reception, for example, in the UK where a lot of the work has come out. This work has not been done by English people, I'm happy to say, but by Peter Hallward, Alberto Toscano and others. The reception in Australia, in the UK, in Latin America precedes that in the US. Alain has, for example, been widely discussed in Argentina for many years, without mentioning the reception of Alain's work in France and elsewhere in Europe. The publication of *Being and Event* will, I hope, will make a difference to the American reception of his work and I look forward to seeing how Alain's influence will grow in the coming years.

However, I think for Alain Badiou's work to be understood, (and he and I were talking about this last night), I think it will require the creation of a new theoretical space or a new intellectual space where a number of things come together: a very strong and constructive idea of philosophy, which is in a certain way novel and unlike what one is used to within a certain discourse, let's call it deconstructive. A constructive philosophy, then, combined with a radical politics, and an interest in theater, in poetry (I think what Alain and I share in particular is a militant concern for poetry), for cinema, for psychoanalysis and – this will be one of the topics for our discussion – also for mathematics. That constellation of elements: there is no space I think that exists for that in the American academy with its strict division of labor and its pseudo professionalization which divides the humanities from each other and from the social sciences and where philosophy prides itself on its cultural irrelevance (laughter). So I think it's a space that has to be created -- and created (and this is my hope) by younger readers of Badiou's work. Some of you, I hope. By people concerned let me just say it directly, with truth, with truth in its different forms: with philosophical truth, with poetic truth, and with political truth, and we'll talk about some of these things.

The current situation with regard to theory is odd, and is maybe defined by a paradox. On the one hand there is a tremendous thirst for a constructive, explanatory, and empowering theoretical discourse and it is defined by the absence of something that would quench that thirst and a sense of frustration and fatigue with a whole range of theoretical paradigms: paradigms having been exhausted, paradigms having been led into a *cul-de-sac*, of making promises that they didn't keep or of simply giving some apocalyptic elucidation to our sense of imprisonment. And I name no names. Badiou's work is something very different. It is refreshing, it's direct, it's concise. It's the concision of thought in Badiou's

work that I think is one of the most striking things about it. It is overwhelmingly conceptually creative and also enabling and empowering. Reading Badiou, certainly for me when I started to read Alain's work a long time ago, it felt like a weight being lifted from my shoulders and once you get a grip on the basic concepts and on the overall system of thought (and this is a *system* of thought), you can mobilize those concepts theoretically, practically, in very powerful ways. In a sense the framework of Alain's thought is simple. It's the articulation that is sometimes more complex but the framework is simple. Those of you who have read Alain's work will know what I mean; those of you who haven't have got difficultly delicious pleasures in store.

As I said, I want to ask four questions:

1. The question of context
2. The question of ontology
3. The question of the event
4. The question of the four subcategories of the event.

Let me just sketch those questions and then I'll turn it over to Alain and then we can begin from there.

Context firstly. I think it's very important with *L'être et L'événement* to understand the context for this book. this context is perhaps even clearer in *Manifesto for Philosophy*, whose publication almost coincides with *Being and Event*. This is a context dominated by a certain Heideggerianism for which philosophy was in a time of closure or 'over'. This is at its most dramatically clear in the work of Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, in particular his *La fiction de politique*. On the one side, there's a Heideggerianism; but the other side of the context is a certain neo-Kantianism: a neo-Kantianism *à la Française* -- of rights, of democracy, of ethics and respect for the other and allied to that a certain Levinasian neo-Kantianism. What is most striking about Alain Badiou's work is its robust defense of philosophy against all forms of the critique of philosophy, whether in the form of positivism, a Marxist idea of poverty of philosophy, or a Lacanian anti-philosophy. So, the first thing is the question of context, I want Alain to talk about that. Then – maybe we should just begin with that - if you could talk perhaps about the context for *Being and Event*.

A: Thank you very much for this presentation, for this friendship. You have said that I was simple, I don't know if it's really true, but I want always to be clear. There is a difference in

philosophy between the question of clarity and the question of complexity. We can be complex but clear and you can be simple but confused. And it's for me really a philosophical duty to be clear. And to address the philosophical discourse in *principle* to everybody. In fact it's sometimes different, but in principle you have from the beginning, from Socrates, to address the philosophical discourse to everybody in the streets. So you have to be clear. It's a relation between the question of clarity and the question of the context. Because in the philosophical context from the beginning of the 80s or a little before we have a philosophical discussion in France in fact between something like a Heideggerian orientation with the idea that philosophy is finishing –not finished but finishing. It's something like an eternal end. And on the other hand something like a return to a Kantian picture of philosophy: moral philosophy, philosophy of rights and so on. And in any case the question of the *possibility* of construction in the philosophical field was like in a crisis. In the Heideggerian conception we have to go beyond philosophy -- beyond metaphysics, but in fact beyond philosophy -- and on the other side we have to restrain philosophy to a moderate politics under the very confused name finally of democracy, which is not a really clear name to adopt in the philosophical because it's a name for everybody. It's a name for Bush and also probably a name for me, so this indicates the real contradiction of that sort of name. And finally my philosophical decision – there is always something like a decision in philosophy, there is not always continuity: you have to decide something and my decision was very simple and very clear. It was that philosophy was possible. It's a very simple sentence, but in the context it was something new. Philosophy is possible in the sense that we can do something which is in the classical tradition of philosophy and nevertheless in our contemporary experience. There is in my condition no contradiction between our world, our concrete experiences, an idea of radical politics for example, a new form of art, new experiences in love, and the new mathematics. There is no contradiction between our world and something in the philosophical field that is finally not in rupture but assumes a continuity with the philosophical tradition from Plato to today.

And we can take one further step, something like that. So we have not to begin by melancholic considerations about the state of affairs of philosophy: deconstruction, end of philosophy, end of metaphysics, and so on. This vision of the history of thinking is not mine. And so I have proposed – in *Being and Event* in fact – a new constructive way for philosophical concepts and something like a reconstruction – against deconstruction – of the

classical field of philosophy itself. And that is for me the more important aspect of the context. But there is some other point, quickly speaking. First, I think that from the beginning of the century there is something wrong in the relation between mathematics and philosophy. Because the new turn of logic and mathematics was completely appropriated by one philosophical current, which is 'Analytical Philosophy'. And so there is a separation, a division, between the living field of philosophy and the new logical framework. And one of my goals was to introduce a completely new vision of the mathematical novelty from the beginning of the century. It was very important for me because a certain division, a separation, was in my opinion a very bad point for the beginning of philosophy itself. After that, another goal was to find something new in the relationship between radical politics and philosophy, but not exactly in the Marxist tradition. I am a Marxist, as is everybody in fact, but no more than everybody. And one of my goals was to find a sort of philosophical framework for radical politics, a bit different from the theoretical materialist tradition. And after that, I have also to understand why there is in modern times a clear relationship between poetry and philosophy. As you know, it's a Heideggerian idea: this renewal of a philosophical interest in poetics is fundamentally in the Heideggerian field. So it's a great discovery of Heidegger that we have to learn something essential from poetry. But one of my goals was to transform the situation and to propose a not exactly Heideggerian vision of the function of poetry in the philosophical field. Last but not least one of my goals was to open a new discussion with psychoanalysis. A discussion, which in my conviction is finally a discussion about love, the question of love as a process, which is in fact the process of a new truth concerning difference as such, a new truth concerning what it is exactly to be 2, a new truth about the difference between 1 and 2. And it was the center of my discussion with Lacan and more generally speaking with the problem of sexuation and love in modern studies. So I have to find new concepts, a new construction as a general framework for all that: a new understanding of mathematics; a not-exactly Marxist relationship between philosophy and radical politics; a not-exactly Heideggerian vision of the relationship between philosophy and poetry; and finally a new dialogue, a new discussion with psychoanalysis and the question of love.

And so the new concepts, the new abstract concepts in *Being and Event* are the construction of a philosophical field where all these questions, all these differences, all these novelties, can be inscribed.

S: Let me just go back to the problem that most people in this room will have with your work and that is the mathematics.

A Ah yes, (laughter). It's a phobia.

S: It's a phobia? I remember Alain once explained to me that the highest pleasure one can have in life was the completion of a mathematical proof.

A: My goal is to change the phobia into love.

S: That's right. So, as a friend of mine put it the other night: "what's with the set theory, what's up with the math, dude?" There are a number of concepts and questions here. The claim is that mathematics is ontology, that Being is explicable in terms of mathematics. This is what Alain calls a subtractive ontology. The claim that all that can be said about what is – ontology is the doctrine of being qua being, the Aristotelian definition of it in the *Metaphysics* – is the task of mathematics. And the claim that mathematics is the domain of knowledge. A key distinction in Alain's work is the distinction between truth (which is the question of the event) and knowledge (which is an ontological question). So: if we begin with the proposition 'mathematics is ontology, how would you want to elucidate that?

A: I can try. The first intuition about that is very simple and it's not properly mine. Because the first intuition is: Being qua being, being as such, being without qualities, without concrete determinations is pure multiplicity. Pure multiple, nothing else. And it's a contemporary rupture, because in fact in the classical tradition the question of being is always the question of the One, of the great One under the name of God or another name. But the question of being in the traditional philosophical framework is the question of One and I think it's a common feature of modern philosophy to think that this relationship between ontology and the One – onto-theology as Heidegger says – has to be criticized. So, a great part of

contemporary philosophy is in fact philosophy of multiplicities. And it's the case for example for Deleuze, but not only for Deleuze; it's the case also for Foucault. In fact, with the concept of difference, it's also the case for Derrida; it's also a critique of the metaphysical concept of the One and so on. So, we have a primitive intuition if you like, which is not just mine, which is probably something like a common philosophical trend in the last century, which is the relationship between being as such and the multiple and not with the one. In one sense it's the same thing as the Nietzschean sentence "God is dead." We can understand the death of God as the ontological death of the One, of the transcendence of the One. But after that, I introduce a new consideration, and that is: multiplicity, ok, but multiplicity is multiple of what? If you are thinking that a multiplicity or multiple is a multiple of elements, which are of a different nature than the multiplicity itself, you introduce the one, like for example in atomistic conceptions. You have multiplicity but a multiplicity of non-decomposable elements. So we have multiplicities of something that is in fact a new form of the one. So we have to say that multiplicity is the multiplicity of multiplicities. That there is nothing else than multiplicities and so the elements of multiplicity are themselves multiples. So we cannot have an end of the one. Finally, we have of necessity *not* a new element that is different in nature than the multiple, but multiples of multiples of multiples, and so on without end. When you have an end, it's nothing; not one but nothing. And nothing is only the multiple of nothing.

So the ontological framework was: we have multiplicities, in fact infinite multiplicities. This is another question, the question of infinity. Infinite multiplicities, multiplicities of multiplicities. We have no concrete decomposition of multiplicity into unified elements and so we stop only in the void; with nothing. And that is in fact the framework of set theory, exactly. In set theory we have nothing else than sets and the empty set as the only point that is a primitive one. This is why I have the assertion: finally, ontology as pure theory of multiplicities is in its real development a theory of sets. But theory of sets is only as you know the Greek logical framework for all mathematics. So mathematics in its historical development is in that sort of framework and we can say that mathematics is the historical development of the theory of multiplicities. So we have finally the sentence; ontology is, historically, mathematics. The only philosophical point is that mathematics doesn't know that mathematics is ontology (laughter). So there is something like a philosophical intervention, which is not to create ontology (because the creation and

development of ontology *is* historical mathematics), but to identify mathematics as being the knowledge of being qua being. To do mathematics, we don't have to think that ontology is mathematics. I don't think a mathematician is a better mathematician if he knows that what he is making is ontology. Mathematics is sufficient for him. But we philosophers can identify, finally, the great framework of all history of mathematics like a theory of the multiple as such and so finally ontology. That is the point.

S: Let's move on then, because there are two names in the title of the book, *Being and Event*, and we've covered being, context and being, so we're moving very logically. So: Event. Could you, because in a sense for people like me who suffer from that mathematical phobia...

A: you go directly to the event?

S: I go directly to the event. Skip being. (laughter) But the way you put it, the claim is a very classical claim: Aristotle claims that there is a science of being as such, *episteme to on e on*, and that's the task of metaphysics and Alain is claiming that that task is one which is inscribed in mathematics and the contemporary form in which mathematics articulates that is set theory. That's a very straightforward claim about the domain of knowledge. Now we come to truth, which is the order of the event. The event is that which ruptures the situational order of being in the domain of knowledge. And this is the order of truth and of what Alain will call the truth-event. This introduces another essential dimension of Alain's work, which is the question of the subject. The question of *Being and Event* is that if this claim about ontology is true, then where does the subject come in? The subject comes in at the level of the event and at the level of truth. So a subject is nothing other than an act of fidelity (another key word in Alain's work) of fidelity to the event of truth. Or to put it more strongly and in yet another key word in Alain's work: a subject is a militant of truth. A militant of truth equally in love as in politics or in science and what this leads to, this is in many ways the emblematic concept on the side of the event in *Being and Event*, the concept of a generic procedure. A subject is that which articulates itself in relationship to an event, finds itself in fidelity to that event; an event is an event of truth and what is orientating in an event, what makes an event an event, as it were, is the fact that it's part of a generic procedure. There's a claim to universality that

then provides the basis as to how we distinguish an event from a non-event and there is a lot of debate and misunderstanding in the literature around that point. So, how would you want to categorize the notions of event, truth, fidelity, generic procedure?

A: I want to begin by something more personal, more biographical in character. The great question for me is not really what being is. Ok, mathematics. I know all that and I can make subtle remarks about being qua being but my fundamental question is a very simple one, quite small. The question is: what exactly is something new? What is novelty? What is creation? This is biographical because it is for me fundamentally the consequence of my experience in France of May 68, and its consequences. It's not an abstract question as I really underwent the experiment of a complete change of life and experienced the conditions of an event. So I have to philosophically justify this experiment. It's not a hard academic problem. My beginning was not: ok, I know what knowledge is, I have to know what truth is. This was not my way. My way was: I have had a living experiment of what is something absolutely new and a vivid experience of when something happens, the very nature of which is novelty, you have something like the birth of a new subject. And I experiment first this point in my life and only after I had to create the concepts to justify and clarify this point. So I go to the concept of an event by thinking that when something really happens you always have a real rupture. You have the creation of a new subject and you have the process of continuation of the subject as such. Finally, we have in fact three fundamental concepts: event, subject, and fidelity, fidelity being the name for the continuation of the existence of the process of the new subject.

The third concept is a very important one because it's another experience in my life, the negative experience, the experience of all people who have abandoned the lessons of the event, who have returned to ordinary life, who have said 'it was an illusion', 'it was our brilliant youth but now we have to do business.' This was for me a very striking experience. So, my global experiences are not only the positive experiences of the event and the consequences of the event as a new subjectivity, but also the negative experience of the end of all that, of discouragement and so on. So I have to create a philosophical framework not only about the surprise of the event, about the fact that revolution is always a surprise and not a result, but also to clarify the question of continuity. Not static or systematic continuity but creative continuity. What is it to continue to be under the law of the event? And you

perfectly understand that it's a question in the political field but also in all fields. For example, it's a question in love: one thing is an encounter and you say 'I love you' and so on; another thing is the hard continuity of all that. Finally what is politics or what is love? It's not precisely the becoming, the birth of a new subject, not only the brilliant event. In fact, it's a construction in the real world. Because an event is much more like a supplement than it is a rupture. Naturally, with the event something new is opened. But you have the real world. An event is not by itself a complete transformation of the world. We have to have the consequences of the event like a process in the event or a process in the situation and so fidelity is the name after the beginning of the new subject for the work of the continuation of that subjectivity, the creative continuation of subjectivity in the world as it is. So it's for me absolutely impossible to explain that the new subject is impossible because of the world. That is a classical argument. The realistic argument: 'oh, we cannot continue because the world is as it is.' But the world is always as it is. There cannot exist for me a contradiction between the new subject and the world and in all that sort of process we have the question of the imperative to continue in the world as it is without taking the world as it is as an objection to the continuation of the process. What is the continuation of the process? The last question, the last concept: the continuation of the process is the creation of something. It's not only the continuation, it's really the creation of something. We have a new subject in the world, we have new experiences, we have something like a new world *in* the old world, piece by piece, not at one time, and we have a process. This process I name the process of a *truth*. Why? Why can we name that sort of process the process of a truth? Let me try and as clearly as I can this really difficult question of truth. When you have an event, what is the relation between the event and the situation, the relation between a real event and the world as it is? The world *for which* there is an event; an event is somewhere, it is not in the sky. So May 68 is in France in a concrete situation and so on. But what is the relation? I can demonstrate or clarify that the relation is that the event is not a consequence of the situation as such, it is not predictable from the point of view of the situation, but it *is* near the central void of the situation.

To understand this we have to return to the question of being qua being. If the situation is a multiplicity of multiplicities, the situation is *made* of the void, finally, of the emptiness. Because multiplicities of multiplicities of multiplicities cannot stop before something which isn't nothing. So we have always a point where being and nothingness are

the same. The fundamental point in the situation is the point where being and nothingness are the same. If you like, it's the vanishing point of the situation. That's a possible name, it's the empty set of the situation, it's the void of the situation, but these are verbal discussions. But you have always something which is the vanishing point of the situation and in an event we have something like a presentation, a happening of the vanishing point. An event is *not* about what is *full* in the situation but what is the void of the situation. It's exactly like in the Marxist tradition the working class is in fact the void-class of the situation. We are nothing, we have to be all but we are nothing – The International. *Being and Event* is, by the way, a commentary on The International. And this is the fundamental point about the relationship between the event and pure multiplicity: when we experience the process of fidelity to an event we have the progressive construction of something which is the truth of the situation *because* it is in its ontological truth the void of the situation. So we have sort of a revelation of the truth of the situation along with the process of fidelity to an event because the relationship between event and the situation touches the void and is something close to the fundamental ontological determination of the situation.

To finish, I can take a clear example: In the case of love, what happens? The event is in the form of an encounter: someone encounters someone else. So you have the creation of a new space that creates the relation to the world not from the point of view of the one anymore, but from the point of view of the two, of difference. We have an experience of the world from the point of view of the difference, from the point of view of the two. And what is the two? The two is always something which is the void between two ones. There is something which is the difference as such. So love is the concrete experience of difference as such that is finally something that is the empty dimension of the difference, which is *not* the content of the difference but the difference *as* difference. Something that finally is not really multiplicity, but which is the essential void of all totality. And this is not an abstract knowledge, it is a concrete experience, a process. We can say finally: Love is the truth procedure among differences as such, or among the two and after that you have to investigate the consequences of all that with sexuation and so on. But you understand the core of the question. Generally speaking, I can say that when you have the process of fidelity to an event, you have the truth of the situation not as knowledge but as creation. So all truth is something new, all truth is creation through fidelity to an event.

So I can propose my answer to my fundamental question, ‘what is something new?’: what is new is a truth in the sense of the process of truth through the situation. And to finish, an explanation of the word ‘generic’: naturally, the mixture between the process of a truth and the question of the void, you have as a consequence that the truth has something universal. The truth has something universal because first it is in relationship with a concrete situation and so it’s something real, it’s not an abstraction or a transcendence, but the relationship to the concrete situation is a relationship across the empty set, across the void and so on. There is a truth about the multiplicity as such, a truth about the ontological framework of the multiple as such. That sort of truth is universal in a concrete sense: that sort of truth is not under a particular predicate of the situation. It’s under the situation as a pure multiplicity. And so it’s generic. You know the word generic is one that is used by Marx – once more, I am a Marxist as is everybody – when he is speaking of the general human vocation of the working class. The emancipation of the working class is the emancipation of all humanity. Why? Because the working class is generic. And why is the working class generic? Because it has nothing. So the relation between nothingness and the generic is perfectly clear in the Marxist text. And I propose only a generalization of all that, a truth is always generic; a truth is the consequence through fidelity of the birth of a new subject; the birth of a new subject is under the condition of an event; and an event is the possibility, not the necessity, but the possibility of the creation of something in relation to the void of the situation.

S: I want to ask two more questions in relation to exactly what you’re saying. Let’s stay with Marx, because that’s a concrete example. If we go back to Marx’s introduction of the category of the proletariat in 1843, the phrase that Marx uses to introduce the category is “I am nothing and I should be everything.” That is: the proletariat as such is a nothing-class in relationship to the void of a situation which expropriates and alienates that agent and that can become the agent of a generic procedure, a universality. If you keep that example, for those in the audience not as familiar with this as you’d like to be, it’s the idea of universality as something created in an act which is an event. So the moment in which for example Marx names the proletariat as the subject that is going to be linked to the truth-event that is the emancipation of humanity, therefore universal, that’s the sort of thing that I think is very much in mind. Which is to say that what is going on in the construction of a political subject

is a poetic act. What Marx is doing with the notion of the proletariat is in a sense an act of poetic creation. It's the becoming generic of a subject, which is like what is in your conception or in mine, too, what a poet does when a poet names something. Now I guess I'd like to ask you about the relationship between poetry and politics but also about the relationship that you have to poetry. Do what you like with this as we have a common interest in that old Connecticut reactionary, Wallace Stevens. So: poetry and politics.

A: First Question. What is for poetry the very nature of a situation? Because if you have something like an event in the poetic field, we have also to understand what is a poetic situation. I think that a poetic situation is always a situation in language. It's a linguistic situation, something like that, it's the state of affairs in the expressive dimension of language. What is a poetic event? It's always the birth of a new possibility of naming inside the language, inside the situation of the language. In fact, a poetic event is the creation of the possibility of naming that which was without name. It's always to find by complex means new names. When something is named, something happens, that is poetry. The consequences of a poetic event are the creation of poems and the appearance of a new poetic subjectivity – Romanticism, Surrealism, and so on. That is not too complicated. But we can say that there is always in every truth procedure a poetic moment. Because we always have to find a new name for the event. The creation of a new name is always part of the birth of a new subjectivity. In love, for example, we have to name the encounter. For example: 'I love you'. 'I love you' is a new name in an ancient form. When we have something really like a new encounter between the field of the two, 'I love you' or equivalent words are new. But in the political field we also have to find a new name and your example was very good: proletariat. Proletariat was the name for Marx of the generic dimension of the working class. And I am very impressed to study the new names in the sciences. For example in mathematics, we have extraordinary names, we have a whole poetics of names. Today we have an extraordinary field of poetic names. Why? Because if a poetic event is the birth of the new possibility of naming, we have to acknowledge a poetic gesture in all truth procedures. And so the relationship between poetry and politics is a very strong one particularly at the beginning of the process. When you are very near the event – and we all know just after May 68 some short political poems were written on the walls in Paris. Why was this? Because we always have to find new names. This is also why the concrete study of

poetry is of great philosophical importance, I think. Because in poetry we can get very close to the matter of language, concrete language, the process of the happening of new possibilities of naming. Because that is a necessity in all truth procedures, the study of poetry is a concrete part of philosophical construction. And we cannot completely understand what is an event without a sense of poetry.

S: So do we have a political name now?

A: It's a great question. I am very struck that we have no name for the event of May 68. In French we say "les événements" so the name of the event is 'event.' It's not great invention; it's weak poetry. But it's a symptom. It's a symptom in fact of our great difficulty today to find new names in the political field. All our names are exhausted, really, and without strength. Democracy, class struggle, revolution and so on are beautiful names but they are today in a sort of state of weakness. So probably the weakest part of politics today is a poetic weakness, weakness of naming. Not weakness of doing: there are revolts, new experiences, maybe no great events, but there is something.

S: What about 'immigrant' as a name, or 'refugee' or 'asylum seeker'?

A: It's too descriptive a name; too sociological a name, too objective a name. I am not saying we are without names at all. We have some names. But we have to consider that in the classical Marxist stage we had a constellation of names which stood in a relationship one with the other – a relationship between 'class struggle', 'revolution', 'communism' and so on. It was not one name, it was something like a sky of names and we have lost the sky. We have isolated names, and ambiguous names. The most important name today in the common conception is 'democracy'. Democracy is a name that is not a name. It is a name that names so many things. The problem is what can today be represented as a democratic event and not as democracy as the only form of state and so on. All names can be reconstructed; all names can refer; names are never completely dead. This is a supplementary reason to be interested in poetry and more generally in experiences in the field of art. There are experiences in the field of art probably with more new names, with new things or with new shapes than in the political field. Ours is not a terrible situation.