

Sophist's Choice

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Abstract: Alain Badiou and Barbara Cassin, close collaborators and friends, seem to stand at opposite ends in their philosophical choices. While Badiou adamantly stands up for philosophy against the ever new kinds of sophistry, Cassin's career is largely devoted to 'rehabilitating' the sophistry which she sees as a structural effect of philosophy, so that philosophy, in its epic battle against sophistry, was combatting its own shadow. The paper tries to investigate how these different choices are based in two strands of Lacan's theory. Lacan in his later teaching proposed two new concepts, *lalangue* and *matheme*, with on the one hand the capacity of language for homonymy and punning, and on the other the stringency of formalization and the letter. Both depart from his earlier theory of conceptualizing language and the symbolic, but seemingly in opposite ways. While Cassin makes a clear choice of *lalangue* and its *jouissance*, seeing in *matheme* a philosophical residue, an off-spring of philosophical obsession with logic and formalization, Badiou on the other hand takes *matheme* as his central issue. They both seem to take one part of Lacan's later teaching and play it against the other. The paper argues that there is no choice to be made between the two and scrutinizes the underlying assumptions of this apparent alternative. It proposes a 'speculative identity' of these two entities which seem to have no common measure, and considers the ways in which they are both involved with the real.

Keywords: Lacan, Badiou, Cassin, *lalangue*, *matheme*, sophistry, the unconscious, the symbolic, the real.

The psychoanalyst is the presence of sophist in our epoch,
but with another stature.
Jacques Lacan¹

'Sophist's choice' sounds good as a title (and I was quite a bit let down when I discovered that it has been used on some Christian evangelical blog ranting against the depravities of modern age and its sophistry), but actually it is meant more seriously than its rhetorical effect may suggest. There is a choice to be made about sophistry, the very appearance of the sophist always entails the call for a choice, a decision. Of course the first obvious choice that comes to mind is the one launched by Plato, and then by Aristotle: there is a choice to be emphatically made between the true philosophy and its counterfeit, between the philosopher and the impostor that is the sophist, the one who is going through the motions

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¹ *Problèmes cruciaux de la psychanalyse*, 12 May 1965, quoted in Cassin 2012, p. 52.

of philosophy without espousing its essential tenets, the make-believe philosopher. The fake philosopher is the greatest danger for philosophy, so the whole Platonic and Aristotelian enterprise can be seen as sturdy fortification that philosophy must erect against this threat. What should be applied when facing the sophist is the famous Marx brothers' joke,² though without its twist: 'This man looks like a philosopher and talks like a philosopher, but don't let that fool you, he is not really a philosopher.'

The condemnation of sophistry as the inner perversion of philosophy was indeed the founding gesture of philosophy, and since sophistry, in different shapes and sizes, kept haunting philosophy as its shadow, the history of philosophy also in many ways coincides with the history of reiteration and recurrence of this condemnation. There was a quasi-unanimity in harsh condemnation, yet the condemned vice nevertheless kept springing up, like jack-in-the-box, tenaciously reiterating the threat. It is as if Plato's *Sophist*, the paradigmatic instance and the origin of this contest, already staged this predicament, for in that dialogue there is curiously no sophist who would defend the cause of sophistry, the title-hero is conspicuously absent, yet he seems to be nevertheless unbeatable, he defies all the attempts to classify him, to pin him down, and even seems to take an ambiguous victory in the end. In the centuries long battle the epistemological grounds – safeguarding the true knowledge against its semblance, the proper argument against the faulty one – shook hands with moral outrage and indignation – safeguarding the true social values against relativism and degeneration. To say nothing of the questionable economic interest of selling knowledge for money.³

Barbara Cassin's work is largely and passionately devoted to taking a very different view of sophistry, and what an impressive oeuvre it is. If through the whole tradition the choice was to be made between philosophy and sophistry, and there was no doubt as to as to what one should choose in this alternative, she now courageously and undauntedly presents another choice to be made. She doesn't shy away from taking the Marx brothers' joke with its twist and all: 'This man looks like a philosopher and talks like a philosopher, but don't let the appearance deceive you, he really is a philosopher, a philosopher actually more interesting and subversive than the Philosopher.' The sophist is, quite literally, a philosopher 'with a vengeance', representing the revenge of discourse on philosophy, the price philosophy has to pay for the disavowal of its own discursive and performative gesture, for its blindness as to its own embeddedness in discursivity, its disowning the power and the effects of language it is using. So the choice between true philosophy and sophistry that philosophy since Plato has been imposing on us is

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2 "Gentlemen, Chicolini here may talk like an idiot, and look like an idiot, but don't let that fool you: he really is an idiot." (*Duck Soup*, dir. Leo McCarey, 1933)

3 For a very good account of this last point cf. Hénaff 2002.

actually a non-choice, it is a choice whose terms have to be dismantled: one has to acknowledge that what is presented as a perversion of the true discourse is rather a structural effect of this discourse itself, indeed its necessary 'sophistic effect', as the title of her book goes, her *opus magnum*.⁴ Thus philosophy, in its crusade against sophistry which raged for millennia, was actually combating its own shadow, the shadow that it necessarily and unwittingly produced by its own discursive devices. There is a fateful disavowal, on the part of philosophy, of the powers of rhetoric, of its own rhetoricity, which it mistook for a mere tool in the deployment of its proper concepts. Conceptuality vs. rhetoricity – such was the choice made by philosophy, unaware that there is no concept without rhetoric and that conceptuality can never be disentangled from its discursive underpinnings. But showing that the choice between philosophy and sophistry is actually a false choice still implies that there is a choice to be made. Choosing not to choose between philosophy and sophistry is a choice of another stance, for what follows is not an ecumenical reconciliation between the two arch-enemies, or a division of labor between the former foes. A new battlefield presents itself, the battlefield of language and its incalculable effects, implying a structural subversion of philosophical propositions, where the new tenets have to displace the old ones. This is where, in her view, sophistry joins forces with psychoanalysis.

Psychoanalysis looms large in this new battlefield, for Barbara Cassin takes it as an ally in these new struggles to be fought, as a kind of new embodiment of sophistry and its revenge on philosophy. In her reading psychoanalysis essentially takes sides with the powers of discursivity – let's say, to make it short, with the capacity of language for homonymy rather than its capacity for synonymy. Sophistry was traditionally accused precisely of using homonymy, this was one of the essential bases of sophistic reasoning and its contended fallacy, the linguistic ground of faulty reasoning.⁵ Words contingently and erratically sound alike, they reverberate beyond their capacity to make sense, they produce effects that blur the lines of all attempts to clearly delineate concepts and keep them well defined. The unconscious always appears as a glitch, a pun that uses the haphazard materials of homonymy, permitting a slide, a short-circuit, where a chance encounter brings together the unexpected distant meanings and plays tricks on them.⁶ This is clearly

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4 Cassin 1995.

5 For the homonymy as the clue to sophistic reasoning cf. Cassin 1996, pp. 342-357, with her close reading of Aristotle's "Sophistical refutations".

6 To take just one example which is close to my heart: Freud's patient, in describing her family, says: "they all possess *Geiz* [avarice] – I meant to say *Geist* [spirit]". (Freud 1975, p 106) There is the contingency in German of *Geiz* and *Geist* sounding alike, almost a homonymy, bringing together in a short-circuit two entities that are starkly opposed: spirit as the elevation beyond the worldly concerns,

at the opposite end from the logic of synonymy, where one and the same meaning can be expressed by a number of different terms, keeping its unity of sense and the identity of a concept despite the divergence of means. The fact of homonymy, at the simplest, is a precondition for the unconscious (whereas synonymy conditions the realm of philosophy and its quest for meaning – this is what the principle *salva veritate* meant: one can use various means and vehicles, provided that truth be salvaged and remain intact). Sophistry always thrived on puns and double entendre, equivocations and faulty arguments, homonymy and short-circuits, rather than on conceptual unity, clear definitions and classifications. On the one hand, the claim to truth, universality, unity, idea; on the other hand, mere punning, parody, fakery, playing tricks with words, contingency. But psychoanalysis presents a new and particularly revealing stage in this eternal struggle, even its culmination and a reversal: aren't the formations of the unconscious constantly using precisely the sophistic means – bad puns, word-play, the faulty argument, the homonymy?⁷ And do the formations of the unconscious not use this as a vehicle to produce the crack of sense, the gap in the production of meaning – a crack where truth can arise? Couldn't one say that the unconscious is structured like sophistry, yet nevertheless producing truth? If Lacan claimed that the unconscious is structured like a language, then certainly not like the language of Plato, but rather like the language of Gorgias and company. Yet it is only in this sophistic element and with its haphazard means that truth emerges, and doesn't cease to surface. Lacan famously proposed the prosopopoeia of the unconscious: 'I, truth, speak' (*Moi, la vérité, je parle*).⁸ One can perhaps propose another one: 'I am the sophist who always speaks the truth'.

Psychoanalysis, in this view, aims at the locus of truth precisely in the erratic logic of homonymy rather than through concepts in their sense-making capacity. There is a fateful 'decision of sense' made by philosophy, to evoke the title of another of Cassin's books,⁹ the decision

striving for the ideal, the transcendence; avarice as the selfishness and greed, accumulating only for one's self-interest. The patient could say what she really thought of her family by the contingency of homonymy, the short-circuit of sound similarity, but one is tempted to elevate this to a parable: avarice is the symptom of spirit, its dark secret, its hidden clause, its sinister flip side – something that calls for writing a history of their intertwining, for which one could propose the most apposite German title *Die Phänomenologie des Geizes*. It so happens that I attempted to write one (Dolar 2002)

7 In his later teaching Lacan rather used the term homophony than homonymy. Is there a difference? Milner argued that homonymy is rather the way that linguistics acknowledges the facts of homophony and neutralizes them in order to salvage their object, *la langue*. "By invoking homonymy, the linguist relies on the external world and the practical use of language. In order to save *la langue*, he puts his trust in *le langage*." (Milner 2017, p. 91) Homonymy appears as a nuisance to be rid off in order to salvage sense and communication, while homonymy envisages it in its senselessness. I continue to loosely use 'homonymy' while one should keep this in mind.

8 Lacan 2006, p. 340.

9 Cassin & Narcy 1998.

to be debunked in its most telling birthplace (among others), the Book Gamma of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, with its emphatic choice of the principle of non-contradiction and the excluded third (the choice of 'signifying' vs. 'saying'). Psychoanalysis, the last avatar of the sophistic underside and underdog, stands at the opposite end, it consistently treats language through the ways that counteract the Aristotelian ban. Most conspicuously, there is no contradiction in the unconscious, as Freud adamantly maintained, nor the excluded middle, yet it is the very locus of an errant truth. There are far more interesting and far-reaching things one can do with language than avoiding contradiction and equivocation.

Lacan, with his knack for simplicity, invented a concept to cover this side of language, *lalangue*. If the signifier, based on differentiability and distinction, can give rise to linguistics and to science, even to the high scientific ambitions of a new epistemology of humanities (this was the epistemological program of structuralism), then the contingent nature of signifiers, based on chance encounters and overlaps, can only give rise to what Lacan called *linguisterie*, linguistery as opposed linguistics. If the first part can be summed up by *la langue*, then this second part can be aptly rendered by *lalangue*, a self-referential pun, which itself displays in its name what it was supposed to demonstrate. *Lalangue* is but a homonym, a minimalistic one, guided not by *salva veritate*, but *salva voce* (or *salvo sono*), rescuing the sound rather than truth, and yet pointing to another kind of truth through this – shall one say 'fidelity to the sound'? If the work of the unconscious can be epitomized by two basic mechanisms, condensation and displacement, *Verdichtung* and *Verschiebung*, metaphor and metonymy, then both are based on this second contingent flip side of the signifier.

Still, one is not easily done with philosophy and its elaborate procedures, and the symptom of this, for Cassin, is Lacan's insistence on matheme. The insistence on matheme goes back not to sophistry, but rather to Plato's and Aristotle's crusade against sophistry: on the one hand to Plato's extolling mathematics as the ultimate science,¹⁰ and on the other and in particular, Aristotle's invention of logic. For what is logic if not the formidable tool to cure language of punning, equivocations, ambiguities, slippages of sense? To be rid of precisely what makes the unconscious possible at all. Logic has always figured as a language doctor, with its proposal of constructing an ideal formal language that would be rid of trials and tribulations of ordinary language and would secure formal means for salvaging the unity of sense. The paradox of this enterprise was that one could eventually only do this by formal means, i. e. by relying on form devoid of content, ultimately by entrusting the rescue of sense and logos to the senseless letter. Logic always isolated

10The inscription on the entry into Academy allegedly ran: "Let no-one ignorant of geometry enter here". Plato's particular predilection for geometry stems from the Pythagorean tradition.

the form as opposed to content, and the invention of mathematical logic, with matheme proper, only brought this to the gist. Curing the language of equivocation and proliferation of meanings came at a price, that of maintaining univocity by something that jettisons meaning. Logic is a philosophical endeavor of long and venerable standing, at the end of which one can find Lacan's infatuation with matheme. (One can add that the most prominent example of this, the notorious formulas of sexuation, is entirely based on a certain reading of Aristotle's logical quadrangle.)

If one takes even a cursory look at *Encore (Seminar XX, 1972/73)* there is the striking fact that Lacan introduces two concepts (but they were long in the making) which go in completely opposite directions, *lalangue* and matheme, without ever explaining their conceptual relation, their complicity or opposition. For Cassin, there is a choice to be made. Indeed her book *Jacques le sophiste* (2012), with its ambition to spell out the relations between logos, sophistry and psychoanalysis, ends on the note of an emphatic choice. Let me quote the last sentence of the book,¹¹ first in her elegant French and then in my clumsy and glossing English translation:

Lacan de rester les bras ballants entre l'amour du mathème aux relents de philosophie et l'effectivité, au moins aussi joyeuse qu'angoissante, d'un blabla de parlêtre – que, et pas seulement en tant que femme, je choisis.¹²

Lacan stays balancing [oscillating, but this can also mean undecided, or idly, helplessly] between [on the one hand] the love for matheme with philosophical residues [where philosophy is still lingering] and [on the other hand] the efficacy, equally joyful and anguishing [at least just as joyful as anguishing], of a blabla of a speaking being – which, and not only as a woman, I choose.

The final word is thus 'I choose', 'je chosis', the choice that Barbara Cassin emphatically assumes as her own with this parting shot. There is a choice to be made between *Jacques le philosophe* and *Jacques le sophiste*, and it appears that there are two souls residing in Lacan's breast, just as in Faust's, the soul of a lingering philosopher and that of a sophist. They are at odds, at least in the way she presents her case, and it's the latter that would have to be chosen.

This choice subtends Cassin's entire argument and the final sentence takes a stand on something that kept presenting itself as a

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¹¹This is the last sentence before the Epilogue, which is written in another tenor and gives an account of an autobiographical event.

¹² Cassin 2012, p.238

choice throughout the book. E. g. the passage where she briefly comments on a quote from Lacan's ... *ou pire*:

'The real affirms itself, through an effect which is not the least, by affirming itself in the impasses of the logic [...]. There we can touch by the finger, in a domain which appears to be the most certain [namely arithmetic], that which opposes the entire sway of discourse [*la prise du discours*], the logical exhaustion, that which introduces an irreducible gap [*béance*]. It is there that we designate the real.' [Lacan 2011, p. 41] Hence my question, which persists since the prologue: are there [would there be] two distinct ways to touch the real, the enjoyment of discourse [*la jouissance du discours*] and the matheme?¹³

The discourse vs. the matheme – such are the terms of a choice, posited midway through the book as a question, to be decisively resolved in the last sentence. (But was there ever really an unresolved question? Wasn't there rather a decision already taken at the beginning, defining the standpoint from which the book could be written at all? A script subtending already its title?). The choice furthermore involves a choice in favor of enjoyment, enjoyment which pertains to the discourse as such, to the blabla, to speaking for the pleasure of speaking – which was what the sophists were constantly accused of. Whereas it seems that there can be no question of the enjoyment of matheme – is matheme thus singularly devoid of enjoyment, the kill-joy?¹⁴ It seems that discourse with its *lalangue* is endowed with an endless and limitless proliferation of enjoyment, whereas the matheme looks like an attempt to cut it short.

If the sophist is to be rehabilitated and put on a par with the analyst, one can see that there are indeed some statements by Lacan that clearly point to the support of the sophist. Apart from the one put up as the motto (the psychoanalyst as the presence of the sophist in our age) we can also read e. g.: "I was wrestling with [Plato's] *Sophist* during these pseudo-holidays. Probably I must be too much of a sophist myself for this to interest me."¹⁵ He seems to be unimpressed by Plato's condemnation

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¹³ Ibid., p.153

¹⁴ Cassin opposes Badiou's coupling of matheme and anxiety (anxiety being a tell-tale sign of touching upon truth, *index veri*) with the coupling of discourse and enjoyment. But surely anxiety is also an index of enjoyment (of its too-muchness)? In the last sentence she quite rightly by-passes this distinction ('just as joyful as anguishing'). But there is no word of the 'affect of matheme'.

¹⁵ "La troisième", quoted in Cassin 2012, p. 56. '*Efficace*', says Lacan – but what is the relation between efficiency and truth? Is truth efficient? "The fact that the sense of their interpretation had effects doesn't entail that the analysts are in the truth, its effects are incalculable. It doesn't bear witness to knowledge since in its classical definition knowledge is ascertained by a possible prediction." (Lacan 2001, p. 558) So both knowledge and truth are divorced from efficiency.

and rather taking the side of the absent sophist under attack, but admitting to not knowing enough about the status of the sophists at the time. Furthermore, part of Lacan's constant and ample engagement with philosophy can be put, in a wide sense, under the heading of what Cassin proposes as "sophistic listening to the history of philosophy",¹⁶ listening with an analytic ear to the embeddedness of philosophical concepts in *lalangue*, their slippages, the unwitting discursive consequences of philosophical propositions (think of his multiple readings and usages of cogito, to take but one instance). – Moreover, there is the striking similarity in the fact that analysts, like the sophists, take money for what they are doing, thus entering into the suspicious realm of being paid for 'delivering (the alleged) knowledge/truth'. "There is like a black-out concerning what people were getting from the oracle of the sophists. No doubt there was something efficient/effective, for we know that they were paying them very dearly, like the psychoanalysts."¹⁷ Even more: Socrates "was practicing a sort prefiguration of analysis. Had he demanded money for it [...] he would have been an analyst, before the Freudian letter."¹⁸ But I can't pursue this line here any further.

In this choice, such as it is set up by Cassin, it is not merely the enjoyment which is at stake, but in the same breath the question of sexual difference. Barbara Cassin chooses '*pas seulement en tant que femme*', not 'just like a woman' (*pace* Bob Dylan), not only in the capacity of a woman (one can perhaps surmise the structure of 'this is not my mother), thereby implying that there is indeed the feminine side of enjoyment which is at stake in discourse, in the blabla, which then entails that the other side, the side of matheme pertaining to philosophy (*aux relents de philosophie*), is to be taken as masculine. There is a choice of femininity vs. masculinity, in line with sophistry vs. philosophy, and one has to opt for the feminine part, but not merely on the grounds of being a woman – the implication is that there would have to be grounds independent of sexual position for making the choice of the feminine side as the viable one, rather than the matheme in its alleged masculinity. This could be strangely in line with Nietzsche's exclamation that truth is a woman (in the opening line of *Beyond good and evil*), so that in this new avatar the non-whole nature of *lalangue* would present the part of the speaking truth, while matheme would represent the 'masculine' knowledge trying to capture it, with no more success than the caricature philosophers, clumsy seducers, that Nietzsche depicted and derided.

There is a subplot to the sexual part of this story, for the particular proponent of the matheme who is secretly and openly the target all

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16 Cassin 2012, p.63

17 "Mon enseignement, sa nature et ses fins" (1968), quoted in Cassin 2012, p. 80.

18 Lacan 2001, p.569

along is Alain Badiou, and on only needs to peruse his books to see the absolute centrality of the matheme, at the simplest as something which is not the effect of discourse and cannot be reduced to the properties of language. Thus she would find in Badiou, her closest friend-foe, a worthy representative of masculinity. So we are bemused to learn that Badiou is a man and Cassin is a woman, and that this bears important theoretical consequences, if obliquely, for of course there can be no question of biological sex – but nevertheless ... As they state themselves in the Introduction to their joint book:

What is at stake in these two studies, or readings, or openings, one by a woman and the other by a man (an important point), is indeed knowledge, considered by one of us in terms of its intimate connection with matters of language and by the other in terms of what philosophy purports to say about truth. So, with regard to Lacan's "L'Étourdit," to the modern theory of sexuation, and to the paradoxes of language and the unconscious, the (male) philosopher, at any rate, can say that what we are dealing with here is a new confrontation between, or a new distribution of, the masculinity of Plato and the femininity of sophistics.¹⁹

So, oddly, they both subscribe to this division themselves. For Cassin, the danger that lurks in matheme is not so much that of reinserting psychoanalysis into philosophy (that too), but rather that of inserting philosophy into Lacan, to make him espouse the philosophical agenda through the matheme, and generally through the concern about logic and formalization, the dimension cut of a different stuff than the punning of discourse and its *jouissance*. "My question remains the same since the beginning: do matheme and discourse touch the real in a different way?"²⁰

Badiou, for his part, also always adamantly insisted, throughout his career, that there is choice to be made, first of all the emphatic choice of philosophy vs. sophistry. The mission of philosophy is ultimately to repeat, to reassert, in each epoch and under different circumstances, the Platonic gesture against the ever new varieties of sophists. The battle of/for philosophy is always the same, up to the new avatars of sophistry under the guise of the linguistic turn, deconstruction and various postmodern brands of anti-philosophy. But the aim of Badiou's philosophical project is not that of rescuing meaning against sophistry, as in the tradition, anything but, the crucial point is the insistence on the fundamental status of matheme, obvious in his notorious stance that

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19 Badiou & Cassin 2017, p.2

20 Ibid. p.185

'mathematics is ontology'.²¹ *Matheme* is *hors-sens*, outside of sense, and even more, *ab-sens*, ab-sense. There is again the question of choice. In his book on Parmenides, e. g., he proposes a choice when confronting this beginning of philosophy, to oppose the fickleness of discursivity by the stringency of *matheme*: "Poetry and predominant language, or *matheme* and formalism? The readers are called upon to choose ..."²² He too subscribes, if implicitly, that there is a choice to be made ultimately between what Lacan called *matheme* and what he called *lalangue*. *Matheme* may seem to be a better candidate for a conveyor of philosophy in its quest for truth, not entangled in the 'linguistic turn' and the endless quirks of language. No division into *langue* and *parole*, no puns and slides, and furthermore no voice, since the mathematical-logical terms that can only be written. If speech is duplicitous and masks as much as it reveals, then *matheme* purports to wear no mask – or does it? As opposed to Lacan's occasional identification with the sophist, one can invoke his resolute insistence on *mathemes* as what can be integrally transmitted and insistence on mathematical formalization as 'our goal, our ideal'.²³ There is the endless poetics, effusiveness, proliferation of *lalangue* that has to be brought to the austerity and asceticism of the *matheme*. And one can invoke Lacan's mechanism of *la passe*, the end of analysis, as the necessary trajectory from the one to the other, since *la passe* ultimately involves the production of transmissible knowledge epitomized by *matheme*.

Is there indeed a matter of choice? We seem to be confronting a strange situation where Badiou and Cassin have made a different choice on the basis of the 'same' Lacanian tenets, one opting ultimately for the *matheme* and standing up for philosophy, the other opting for *lalangue* with all its homonymy and puns, opting for the sophistry inscribed into language as its structural effect. Cassin, sidestepping the issue somewhat, says at some point: "Why not *matheme*, among other things? – would I gladly say, just as the sophist says apropos of truth."²⁴ So why not truth, among other things, but not as the ultimate issue, focusing philosophy on the (fateful?) path of the absolute. She seems to be saying 'I gladly (*volontiers*) concede truth, and *matheme*, but only among other things, *entre autres*.' Badiou, for his part, can only be horrified by this kind

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21 For the present purpose we can set aside the differences between mathematics, set theory, traditional and mathematical logic.

22 Badiou 2014, p.12

23 For Badiou the sophist's choice, the choice of anti-philosophy, can be ultimately reduced to the thesis that 'there is no truth'. Thus for him Lacan represents a paradoxical anti-philosopher who resolutely insists on truth, an anti-sophist anti-philosopher. For Cassin, the sophist "doesn't aim at truth, but at discourse: being, and truth if you wish [!], is an effect of saying." (2012, p. 76) Thus not the abandonment of truth, but truth that has the makings of another 'sophistic effect', among many.

24 Cassin 2012, p. 184

of offhand talk, he adamantly insists on holding on to truth in its eternity (beyond the temporal dialectic that psychoanalysis is bound with, cf. Badiou 2017, p. 61), and holding on to truth that is not constituted by the act of saying (beyond any kind of linguistic turn – and *matheme* is the best vehicle to oppose the linguistic turn). It is as though each of the two, Badiou and Cassin, would take one part of Lacan, and both things are definitely part of the Lacanian doctrine, make their choice and ultimately play the one against the other.

I would rather like to argue that one should refuse or circumvent the terms of this choice. There is no choice to be made between the two, both point into a radical direction of the real that is at the core of psychoanalysis, and it is precisely in their mutual co-dependence and co-implication that one can get to this real. Lacan's insistence on both has to be taken seriously. The centrality of reflections on language made his early fame: "The function and field of language and speech in psychoanalysis" was the title of his essential manifesto, the notorious 'Rome discourse' in 1953; "the unconscious structured as a language" was the canonical formula, and this all seemed to entail the prevalence of the symbolic, massively present in his teaching in the fifties. But 'language' was then pushed into two opposite directions, that of *lalangue*, the capacity of language for homophony and punning, and that of *matheme*, the formalization and the letter. Both presented language under the auspices of something that internally exceeds its anchorage in the symbolic, two ways in which the symbolic cannot be considered in its separation and autonomy, sustained merely by the signifier. Two ways in which the signifier cannot be considered in its 'purity and independence', which was the great dream, the fundamental fantasy of structuralism.

One could say, at the risk of simplification, that language was traditionally considered through its two manifestations, the vocal and the written, the voice and the letter. The Saussurean revolution, the introduction of the logic of the signifier, sidestepped this division altogether and proposed a completely abstract logic of differentiability as the key to language, an immaterial logic disregarding its two material manifestations, or regarding them as secondary and derivative. Considering our problem in this light, it is as if *lalangue* reintroduced the dimension of 'the voice in the signifier' (homonymy, echoes, sound similarities etc.) and the *matheme* reintroduced the dimension of 'the letter in the signifier' (voiceless, senseless, something that can only be written etc.). But this 'reintroduction' was not like going back to the traditional division, it operated on the basis of the symbolic, presenting its own internal twists, 'excrescences' of their inherent materialization – and there is no pure signifier without its 'becoming material' (or rather 'becoming object of the signifier'). What they both have in common is that they don't abide by the pure differentiability which defined the symbolic order in its autonomy, yet they are not introduced as something

heterogeneous or alien to the symbolic, they inhere in it and inhabit it as its own inner 'slides'. But this may then put into question the stark division into the three dimensions of the symbolic, the imaginary and the real which was the foundation of Lacan's teaching throughout, the three dimension to be knotted together on the basis of their being irreducible to each other (and indeed the introduction of *sinthome* in later Lacan can well be seen as a symptom of it – not without a pun).

But presenting *lalangue* and *matheme* as derivative of the symbolic, as its slides and excrescences, is perhaps a misguided way of rendering what is at stake. Maybe there is a more radical change of perspective in the balance, which puts into question the precedence of the symbolic altogether. There is a radical difference in envisaging language via the symbolic or through the lens of *lalangue*. As Milner lucidly put it:

La langue [language] is entirely reducible to negative relations; each linguistic sign exists only as opposed to another; its elements have no positivity by themselves; their sensorial qualities are of no consequence. [...] Homophony, on the contrary, depends on the *qualia*. *Lalangue* is integrally positive and affirmative.²⁵

But if they are of cut of a different stuff, then the question of precedence is blurred and may be overturned. Which comes first? One can make a simple observation that when first learning a language the child actually enters its domain through babbling, experimenting with sounds and their repetitions, in one word, through *lalangue*, which is only subsequently regulated by the symbolic. The advent of the symbolic thus structurally involves a repression of homophony.²⁶ *Lalangue* would then appear to be the fundamental given, in its positivity, and the signifying logic would rather involve a 'dematerialization', or immaterialization, or negativization of this positivity, its repression. What appears as an additional 'ornament' actually comes first. Furthermore, this reversal of perspective would entail that *lalangue* can no longer be seen as the realm of mere chance encounters – it can only appear so if we consider it from the standpoint of the symbolic and its necessity (necessity following from its purely negative nature). Lacan says that much: the fact that there is homophony (like between *deux* and *d'eux* in French, to take his often used example) is not to be attributed to mere contingency: "It is neither mere chance nor arbitrariness, as Saussure says."²⁷ But if it's no contingent, it

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25 Milner 2017, p.88

26 This would account for the privilege of the mother tongue: it is the only language where *lalangue* precedes the acquisition of *la langue*. With all other languages one learns the sequence is reversed.

27 Lacan, "La troisième", quoted in Milner 2017, p. 82.

doesn't follow that it is necessary, it rather pertains to a realm which is neutral between chance and necessity²⁸, beyond both, indifferent to both.

If *lalangue* can thus be seen as something primary in relation to *la langue* and the symbolic, then *matheme* presents a different problem and temporality. It is based on an intricate 'artificial' invention and construction designed to counteract the insufficiencies of the symbolic, its impasses and slides, most prominently its constant contamination with *lalangue*. *Matheme* is the anti-*lalangue*. It should purge the language of contingency (stemming from the persistent return of the repressed *lalangue*, hence the 'sophistic effect'). Its weapon is the sturdiness of the letter, but a letter which is divorced from the phonematic nature of language, from its function to literalize the phonemes, the apparent first purpose of alphabetical writing.²⁹ It is the dimension of the letter precisely irreducible to the symbolic (and its purely negative differentiability).

There is another kind of inversion at stake: if in the whole tradition of what Derrida has called phonocentrism writing was seen as secondary, derivative, supplementary, accessory etc. in relation to the primacy of the pure self-presence of the voice (the notorious 'metaphysics of presence'), hence dangerous and disruptive, then with the *matheme* and the whole enterprise of formalization it is precisely this secondary auxiliary addition that gains the stature of the savior, the steadfast weapon against the vagaries of chance encounters of voices and sounds. It purports to be the rampart of necessity against the tides of linguistic chance – but the point of its Lacanian use is rather to pinpoint its utter ambiguity (and to push it a bit, perhaps to render it too 'neutral between necessity and chance').

From this perspective *lalangue* and *matheme* would thus present the dimensions of what comes 'before' and 'after' the symbolic, and their strange short-circuit, if there is one, would consequently lead to Lacan's abandonment of the precedence of the symbolic altogether.³⁰

I will limit myself to two points. Lacan doesn't address the relation between the two strands directly, but nevertheless gives some cursory indications. The *mathemes*, he says, "are integrally transmitted. We haven't the slightest idea what they mean, but they are transmitted."³¹ They are capable of integral transmission at the price of meaning and

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28 Milner 2017, p.86

29 Freud frequently uses the analogy with hieroglyphs and rebuses when speaking of the language of the unconscious. Couldn't one see there, in analogy with the repression of *lalangue*, the 'return of the repressed' in the realm of writing, of what was repressed and relegated to a mythical past by the invention of the alphabet?

30 To complicate matters even further, Badiou, from his philosophical standpoint, would not agree with this description and would insist on the precedence of the mathematical ontology – but this 'precedence', if this is the word, is in line with the eternal nature of truth in philosophy, disregarding the temporality of its emergence. But this is a matter of another development.

31 Lacan 1998, p.110

understanding. But this comes with a warning: “Nevertheless, they are not transmitted without the help of language, and that’s what makes the whole thing shaky.”³² And more pointedly:

Mathematical formalization is our goal, our ideal. Why? Because it alone is *matheme*, in other words, it alone is capable of being integrally transmitted. Mathematical formalization consists of what is written, but it only subsists if I employ, in presenting it, the language I make use of. Therein lies the objection: no formalization of language is transmissible without the use of language itself. It is in the very act of speaking that I make this formalization, this ideal meta-language, *ex-sist*.³³

Furthermore, there is the famous “The analytical thing will not be mathematical. [*Le truc analytique ne sera pas mathématique.*] This is why the discourse of analysis differs from the scientific discourse.”³⁴ There is the first important point: the formalization of *matheme* is not to be conceived as a meta-language in relation to the ordinary language and its *lalangue*. But not only because we always have to use language as a vehicle and the framing of formalization, but more importantly because there is no meta-language in relation to the real, and this holds for both *lalangue* and *matheme*. There is no meta-relation between the two because they both touch upon a real, rather than designating it or trying to spell it out as something external to them. The real is not some dimension out there that they would try to pin down, but it emerges precisely in the paradoxes and impasses of their deployment, and there is no other way of getting to it. Regarding the relation between the two the point is not that the *matheme* has the capacity to be rid of equivocity, ambiguities and slides of language (epitomized by *lalangue*), so that we could then hold on to the letter and formalization in its univocity as the best way to tackle the real. The point is rather that formalization, in its effort to cure the impasses of language, itself runs into its own impasses. Both sides in their seeming opposition are rather held together by their shared impasse, although it may appear under very different guises in the one and the other, and it is by their shared impasse that they pertain to the real.

Thus formalization is not a way out of the trickery, ambiguity and homonymy of language, but rather a way of formalizing it, seizing it, yet not through the neutrality and stability of logical form: the history of

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32 Ibid

33 Ibid., p.119

34 Ibid., p. 117

logic is the history of tackling paradoxes produced by its initial gesture itself, the impasse that formalization itself has always entailed. Just as “a language [...] is nothing else but the sum total of equivocations that its history has allowed to persist there”,³⁵ so the logic is nothing but the sum total of paradoxes it had to tackle since its inception (starting with the liar paradox even before, which extended its long shadow to Russell’s critique of Frege): “I will just recall that no logical elaboration, starting from before Socrates and also elsewhere than in our tradition, has ever proceeded but through a kernel of paradoxes – to use the term that is acceptable everywhere.”³⁶ Logic may not be a matter of punning and slides, it was invented precisely to thwart them, yet this invention itself cannot escape the re-inscription of the very impasse it was trying to avoid and to cure. But this is not to be seen as its failure and deficiency: the fact that it necessarily leads to impasses is the way that it holds to the real. The logic, the *matheme*, is not a happy way of how to disentangle oneself from a mess, but how to run into another mess by trying to avoid the first one. The formalization always turns out to be the formalization of the impasse of formalization.³⁷

This is also why proposing *matheme* as masculine and the *jouissance* of *lalangue* as feminine is a questionable way of conceiving it, for, first, the paradoxes of the impossibility of inscribing or defining the sexual difference pertain to both sides, and the logical way of circumscribing the feminine position is the very point of the formulas of sexuation – they inscribe precisely the impossibility of its inscription (inscribing the impossibility of writing what “doesn’t stop not being written”³⁸ – *matheme* as such is not a ‘male’ way of inscribing the exceeding feminine impossibility and thus bringing it to the letter, an attempt to bound the unbounded). To make it quick, ‘Gödel’, at the simplest, may be taken as an index of the non-whole, non-totalizable nature of logic itself, the impossibility of its simple placement on the masculine side. Another way of putting it, the speaking errant truth of sophistry (‘I am the sophist who always speaks the truth’) and the *matheme* don’t relate to each other as truth and knowledge: *matheme* is precisely not the knowledge spelling out the errant truth in no uncertain logical-mathematical terms, it is itself another way of presenting the errant truth and its impasses, not in any meta-position in relation to it.³⁹

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35 Lacan 2001, p.490

36 Ibid., p.482

37 For all this cf. the striking analysis of Zupančič 2017, pp. 66-70.

38 Lacan 1998, p.94

39 Badiou argues quite rightly and at length that there is a Lacanian triad truth-knowledge-real where none of the terms can be put in meta-relation to others. Cf. Badiou & Cassin 2017, pp. 49 ff.

If the aim of analysis is the production of transmissible knowledge, hence the procedure of *la passe*, this entails a reduction of the proliferation of sense (propelled by free associations, interpretation etc.), cutting it short, producing a break, a cut not merely of non-sense, but of ab-sense.⁴⁰ As Lacan put it:

“[Interpretation] is directed not so much at the meaning as towards reducing it to the non-meaning of the signifiers, so that we may rediscover the determinants of the subject’s entire behavior [...] not in its signifiatory dependence, but precisely in its irreducible and senseless character *qua* chain of signifiers.”⁴¹

So there is a fundamental imperative of formalization, the reduction of the signifiers to the senseless letter, yet this shouldn’t be too quickly translated into a choice between *lalangue* and *matheme*. To put it bluntly and most economically: “All Lacanian word plays are *mathemes*.”⁴² They condense the endless punning into formulas that, despite their seeming demeanor of witticisms, present the radical direction of ab-sense, a break. The proliferation of punning can be cut short by a pun – if it’s a proper one, i. e. if it can function as a *matheme*. This is what makes the difference of ‘Lacanian puns’, with their capacity to become formulas, to the vast propensity to punning at large.

There is another way of approaching the problem, already started above, and this is my second point. One can say that there are two conditions for the unconscious: first, no unconscious without homonymy, the contingent encounter of sounds, the echoes, the re-con-sonances, the realm of chance beyond the differential logic of the signifier and its necessity; and second, no unconscious without the letter, and one can sense this already in Freud’s constant use of ‘metaphors’ of cypher, deciphering, of rebus and hieroglyphs when speaking of the unconscious, based on the implicit analogy with writing. This becomes explicit with Lacan: one of his most famous texts bears the title “The instance of the letter in the unconscious” (1957), where the implied difference between

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40 Cassin argues that Freud’s enterprise could be largely put under the heading of looking for “sense in the nonsense”, as the general thrust of his interpretations, which for Cassin qualifies “the entire Freudian project as submitted to Aristotelianism” (Cassin 2012, pp. 135-136), an expanded salvaging of sense, reaching even to the remotest corners of nonsense. Whereas Lacan’s endeavor ultimately aims at “nonsense in the sense” (p. 138), abandoning altogether the Aristotelian “decision of sense”. Hence ab-sense beyond the opposition sense/nonsense and also beyond *hors-sens* (cf. pp. 180-181), a point that Badiou concurs with.

41 Lacan 1979, p.212

42 Milner 2017, p.88

the signifier and the letter looms large.⁴³ Not just the instance of the signifier, but the letter and its inscription. It was only much later that he could fully spell this out with his theory of the *matheme*. Thus we have on the one hand the voice value of sound encounters in homophony, and on the other the senseless letter deprived of voice value, both based on ‘materialization’ rather than on the purely negative nature of the symbolic, on ‘becoming voice’ and ‘becoming letter’ of the signifier. Both voice and letter are that in the signifier that doesn’t contribute to making sense. But they seem to be opposed and unrelated, with no common measure, the volatility of the passing voice vs. the fixity of the letter.

There is a long tradition that imposed a ‘spontaneous’ view that in this opposition the voice is conceived as feminine, evoking the boundless feminine *jouissance*, whereas the letter is regarded as masculine (the letter of the law, *logos*, logic etc.). In my book on the voice I spent a long time scrutinizing the long and inveterate ‘metaphysical’ tradition of combatting the seductive, intoxicating and threatening powers of the feminine voice (the emblematic instance are the Sirens), the constant source of danger and decay, by the means of *logos*, the anchorage in the word, the letter, the unity of sense, the submission to the law.⁴⁴ The Lacanian point is simply that one shouldn’t give in to this spontaneous hang, this quasi-natural tendency, that one should insist not simply on their co-belonging, but on their speculative unity, as it were. This is where the Hegelian infinite judgment is perhaps the conceptual device that needs to be put to its full use: that the voice can ultimately be epitomized by the letter of the *matheme*, and that the letter in its seeming fixity ‘equals’ the vacillation and fleetingness of the voice. As in Hegel, the infinite judgment acknowledges the full discordance and incommensurability, the cleft, the non-totalizable nature of the two entities, yet their co-belonging through this very cleft. The spirit of *lalangue* (pertaining to what is in French most appropriately called *mot d’esprit*), the bone of the letter? *Même combat*.

If there is no choice to be made between the two, this then opens up the field of many stark and arduous choices and decisions concerning the truth, the knowledge and the real.

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43 One can further recall the reading of Poe’s “The purloined letter” in early Lacan, where the ambiguity letter/letter is intended and put to use. Implicitly it’s not merely the question of the signifier but of the letter.

44 Dolar 2006, pp.42-52

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