

## Hermeneutics or Mathematics? Two Ways of Thinking Plurality Today. Gert-Jan van der Heiden

Against a strand of thought represented, among others, by Heidegger, Blanchot, Derrida, Deleuze, and Nancy, Badiou argues that the true Greek event of philosophy is the interruption of both the poem and the myth by the invention of the matheme. Thus, Badiou argues that philosophy is mathematical in nature. This leads to the following question: What happens in Badiou's decision for mathematics and does this decision indeed lead to a fundamentally different account of the plurality of being than a poetic one? In this paper I intend to confront Badiou's ontology with a more poetically oriented ontology that develops a conception of the plurality of being as well. The work of Jean-Luc Nancy seems to be a natural starting point for such a task. His work is poetically oriented and his work is explicitly concerned with developing an ontology of plurality. In this essay, I set the stage for an argumentative confrontation between the mathematical and the poetical orientation of philosophy in terms of a confrontation between Badiou's mathematical and Nancy's poetic-hermeneutic conception of plurality.

When Badiou develops his idea that mathematics is a science of being *qua* being, he does so in continual discussion with Heidegger. <sup>1</sup> This choice for Heidegger serves Badiou's polemics in *L'être et l'événement* (1988), in which Heidegger is brought into play as the exemplary representative of a philosophy that takes poetics as its guideline. As Badiou writes elsewhere, Heidegger represents a strand of thought that has «put philosophy in the hands of the poem» (Badiou 1999, 66, 70), a strand of thought represented by Blanchot, Derrida, Deleuze, Lacoue-Labarthe, and Nancy. According to Badiou, the alternative to this poetic orientation in philosophy is a mathematical one and these two different orientations are as old as philosophy (Badiou 1988, 143). As Badiou remarks «que la pensée absolument originaire se meut dans le poétique» (ibid.). Hence, a real debate on the nature of philosophy is at stake in the discussion between poetic and mathematical thought. In fact, one might even see a certain symmetry in these two orientations: Badiou criticizes the poetic strands of thought for having sutured philosophy to poetics and thus forgetting to connect philosophy to its other conditions, such as science, politics and love. However, as Badiou's critics wonder, does the mathematical orientation not suture philosophy to mathematics? <sup>2</sup> In *L'être et l'événement*, this latter question is affirmed by the remark Badiou makes immediately after his acknowledgment of the two orientations of philosophy. Here, he argues that the true Greek event of philosophy is the interruption of both the poem and the myth by the invention of the matheme (Badiou 1988, 144). Thus, Badiou argues that philosophy is mathematical in nature. This leads to the following question: What happens in Badiou's decision for mathematics and does this decision indeed lead to a fundamentally different account of the plurality of being than a poetic one?

To be able to address these questions, it is necessary to confront Badiou's ontology with a more poetically oriented ontology that develops a conception of the plurality of being as well. The work of Jean-Luc Nancy seems to be a natural starting point for such a task. His work is poetically oriented and belongs to the Heideggerian strands of thought. Moreover, his work is explicitly concerned with developing an ontology of plurality. Finally, in Nancy's *Le partage des voix* (1982), it is clear that the relation between his conception of plurality and poetics is not vague or arbitrary, but rather concerns the very heart of his concept of *partage* that forms the heart of his account of plurality.

In this essay, I set the stage for an argumentative confrontation between the mathematical and the poetical orientation of philosophy in terms of a confrontation between Badiou's mathematical and Nancy's poetic-hermeneutic conception of plurality. Such a confrontation does not only allow us to understand more carefully what Badiou's critique of poetic thought consists in and what is at stake in the debate between mathematics and hermeneutics, but it will also allow me to show which dimensions of plurality Badiou is unable to think and which po-

<sup>1</sup> A more elaborate account of the ideas expressed in this essay as well as a further positioning of the work of Badiou and Nancy in the framework of other contemporary accounts of ontology may be found in van der Heiden (2014), especially in the first three chapters.

<sup>2</sup> Badiou 1999, 60. According to Noys (2003, 128), these critics forget that philosophy is not equated with mathematics. Although this distinction between philosophy and mathematics is clearly due to Badiou, it is also clear that his account of both plurality and thought is derived from his conception of what mathematics is. In fact, it is mathematics from which Badiou derives his specific conception of concepts such as choice, the operation of fidelity and forcing. At any rate, in relation to this criticism, one has to deal with the double status of mathematics as «the discourse of ontology» and as «one subjective condition among others» (cfr. Bosteels 2001, 200-229, footnote 15).

etic-hermeneutic elements still play a role in his thought. In the first section, I will discuss Badiou's critique of poetically oriented philosophies and of hermeneutics. In this way, I will be able to identify the main themes Badiou criticizes under the heading of poetic thought and hermeneutics. In the second section, I will bring Nancy's conception of hermeneutics into play in order to show to what extent this conception can and cannot answer Badiou's criticisms and to which conception of plurality such a poetic-hermeneutic approach leads. Moreover, in this section, I will reassess some of the poetic-hermeneutic elements from Badiou's work. In the third section, I will make a few concluding remarks on the platonic tradition to which both models of plurality claim to belong.

## 1. Badiou's Critique of Poetic-Hermeneutic Thought

Badiou's account of the poetic orientation of philosophy concerns first and foremost the hermeneutic-phenomenological philosophies of the 20th century. Of course, it remains to be seen to what extent his points of critique can be applied in their generality to a diversity of oeuvres. Therefore, I will assess three major points of critique: (1) subtraction; (2) plurality without measure; (3) meaning versus truth.

### 1.1. Subtraction

Let us begin with the most difficult and abstract issue that Badiou takes up in his critique of Heidegger. It concerns the issue of truth as *alētheia* or unconcealment (*Unverborgenheit*) that describes a phenomenological access to being.<sup>3</sup> Heidegger always thinks the disclosure of being in relation to a more primordial withdrawal (*Entzug*) of being. Because of this withdrawal, being itself can never be brought to presence completely. Yet, this emphasis on the withdrawal of being as the source from which the unconcealment of being arises, indicates according to Badiou that Heidegger's and similar (hermeneutic) phenomenologies aim to provide an intuition of the nothing that is being, thus offering «un trajet de proximité» to approach and experience being as close as possible. Apparently, despite the withdrawal of being, these phenomenologies still aim to do the impossible and come as close to being as possible. According to Badiou, it is typical for poetic thought to search for nothingness in the sense of trying to intuit and draw close to being (Badiou 1988, 67).

<sup>3</sup> Elsewhere I have shown to what extent this problematic itself can be seen as a Heideggerian heritage, cf. van der Heiden (2012, 115-131).

This problematization of nothingness does not imply that the notion of nothingness would not play any role in Badiou's thought. In fact, his account of the void as the name of being clearly shows that he embraces his own version of Heidegger's ontic-ontological difference in which being is nothingness. Yet, philosophy's relation to the void should not be accounted for in terms of a withdrawal that nevertheless still provides something to experience, but rather in terms of subtraction: being is subtracted from *any* presentation, i.e., it is not presented itself since it is presentation itself. Hence, one might say that Badiou radicalizes the in-access to being.

Heidegger's withdrawal of being is approached in light of the poetic effort to provide an experience of and with being. This means that poetic thought moves from the index of being to an experience of what is indexed, namely be-

ing. Mathematical thought, on the other hand, does not proceed by presenting the unrepresentable. By radicalizing the inaccessibility of being, thought receives a different direction. Rather than trying to overcome the subtraction of being by moving back to its origin, mathematical thought moves in the other direction, namely in the direction of *consequences* of a decision. To understand this, one should consider the role played by axioms in mathematics. Axioms are the starting point of mathematics that are not grounded in any experience (of being). Therefore, their introduction should be thought as a *decision* and as an *intervention*.<sup>4</sup> Subsequently, the work of the mathematician is a form of *fidelity*—a *deductive* fidelity—that draws the consequences of these decisions. This structure is applied to ontology, as Badiou (1988, 67) emphasizes: «Toute saisie de l'être suppose, quant à l'existence, une décision qui, sans garantie ni arbitrage, oriente décisivement la pensée».

## 1.2. Plurality without Measure

The second theme in Badiou's critique of the poetic-hermeneutic philosophies concerns a more direct criticism of hermeneutics in its more classical sense, as developed by philosophers such as Gadamer and Ricoeur. This critique concerns in the first place the type of plurality that is thinkable in classical hermeneutics. To see this, consider e.g. Ricoeur's account of the plurality of interpretations as offered in *Le conflit des interprétations* (1969).

Ricoeur argues here that different practices of interpretations exist providing us with different and even mutually conflicting interpretations of (the meaning of) being and human existence in particular. Yet, *since being is one*, a hermeneutic ontology cannot simply end up its inquiry with such a multiplicity of conflicting interpretations since every inquiry into the meaning of existence is regulated by this unity of being (Ricoeur 1969, 23). The regulative idea of the unity of being, implies that these conflicting conceptions of being should be understood as different aspects of one human existence that demand a «figure cohérente de l'être» (Ricoeur 1969, 27).

It is exactly this latter aspect of Ricoeur's hermeneutic ontology to which Badiou protests. He does so for two obvious reasons.

(1) *Primacy of multiplicity*. In the first place, he proposes a conception of being in which plurality precedes unity. In his reading of Plato's *Parmenides*, Badiou notices that the Greek pair of the one (*hen*) and the many (*polla*) ultimately privileges the one. Reading Badiou's remark on the conflict of interpretations in light of this pair, we see that for him Ricoeur's account of the plurality of interpretations is just a variation of the many as *polla*. Consequently, Ricoeur develops a hermeneutic ontology that remains within the boundaries of the *hen-polla* distinction. Yet, the *Parmenides* also introduces a notion of plurality that transcends this distinction, namely the notion of *plēthos*. This notion, which Badiou prefers to translate as «multiplicité» to distinguish it from *polla* or «pluralité», appears only under the hypothesis that the one is not (Badiou 1988,

<sup>4</sup> Badiou (1988, 226) describes the intervention as follows: «L'intervention a pour opération initiale de faire nom d'un élément imprésenté du site pour qualifier l'événement dont ce site est le site». Clearly, with this emphasis on decision, also the realm of faith, conviction and even religion come into play at the heart of thought. This is clearly visible in Badiou's book on Saint Paul (1997, 15-17). Note also what Derrida (2000, 88) writes on the notion of the axiom: «Un axiome affirme toujours, son nom l'indique, une valeur, un prix; il confirme ou promet une évaluation qui doit rester intact et donner lieu, comme toute valeur, à un acte de foi». Derrida relates this notion to the problematic of the holy and the sacred. In fact, according to him, the problem of the axiom gives rise to the very connectedness of the two sources of religion which he locates in the holy - the intact - and in belief - the act or confession of faith (*acte de foi*) to which the intact should give rise.

45). <sup>5</sup> Hence, (Ricoeur's) hermeneutics would only allow for plurality and not for multiplicity in Badiou's sense of the word.

<sup>5</sup>This discussion starts in *Parmenides* 163b.

Of course, it remains to be seen to what extent this focus on a plurality that is guided by oneness is typical for *all* forms of hermeneutics and poetic thought. In fact, as I will suggest in one of the following sections, Nancy's reinterpretation of hermeneutics exactly challenges the same element in Ricoeur's thought as Badiou does in order to develop a poetic conception of a plurality that is not subsumed under oneness.

(2) *Multiplicity and decision*. In the second place, Badiou criticizes hermeneutics for conceiving of the conflict of interpretations as a conflict that can be resolved in a form of consensus. Clearly, both the possibility and the requirement of such a consensus is founded in the fact that the many interpretations concern a shared existence. However, Badiou does not accept this presupposition of (Ricoeur's) hermeneutics; existence is not the primary given to which all practices of interpretation respond. Rather, one must first *decide* on what counts as existing, as he puts it in *Court traité* (1998), and this decision orients thought (Badiou 1998, 52). The conflict between conceptions of being is not secondary to a primary givenness of being, but it is primary since the decision on what counts and what does not count as being determines the orientation of every philosophical thinking on being. Hence, the issue that Badiou takes up with hermeneutics concerns the question of what discloses a particular orientation in thought: decision or a previous givenness.

Also with respect to this second element in Badiou's critique of Ricoeur's hermeneutics, it is important to note, anticipating the next section, that it is exactly this opening of an orientation that is at stake in Nancy's critique of "classical" hermeneutics as well. However, his critique informs a reinterpretation of both hermeneutics and meaning.

### 1.3. Meaning versus Truth

Badiou's dismissal of hermeneutics can also be found in his rejection of the notions of meaning and interpretation (Badiou 1998, 54). An important example of this dismissal can be found in *L'écriture du générique: Samuel Beckett* (1992), where Badiou describes a development in Beckett's work from interpretation to nomination, Badiou's alternative to interpretation. This development concerns the possibility of addressing *events* in poetics. In works such as *Watt*, Badiou argues, Beckett does not arrive at addressing these events and incidents in an adequate way since

[L]es hypothèses sur les incidents *restent captives d'une problématique de la signification*. Nous sommes encore dans une tentative de type herméneutique, où l'enjeu est, par une interprétation bien conduite, de raccorder l'incident à l'univers établi des significations. (Badiou 1992, 349)

In the transition from *Watt* to *Fin de Partie*, however, interpretation is replaced by nomination (Badiou 1992, 349-350). An interpretation is an effort to understand an incident or an event, i.e., something utterly new in the situation, in terms of an already established universe of meaning. Due to this reattachment of the event to what is already given in a situation, the interpreter reduces and by that

reduction loses the event. That is to say, the interpreter does not preserve the supplementary character of the event with respect to the situation. This is why hermeneutics fails to do justice to events: an event interrupts the situation as well as the established universe of meaning.

This dismissal of hermeneutics mirrors Badiou's remarks in *L'être et l'événement*. Also here, he distinguishes the notion of nomination from signification. What in *Conditions* is called the established universe of meaning, is called the language of the situation in *L'être et l'événement*. This language consists of names referring to entities (i.e., multiplicities) presented in the situation. Interpretation is for Badiou nothing but reducing the event to these names. Consequently, interpretation cannot do justice to the supernumerary character of the event. By contrast, nomination is an intervention in the language of the situation that adds a name, namely the name of the event, to this language. This latter name has a peculiar status: it is an empty name since it does not refer to an entity presented in the situation (Badiou 1988, 436-437). Yet, this simply means that nomination introduces a new name opening up the possibility of a renewal of this language.

This difference between interpretation and nomination returns in the difference between meaning and truth. For Badiou, truth should be carefully distinguished from meaning in the situation. In fact, he introduces a distinction between two attitudes or comportments towards the situation: knowing or understanding and fidelity. The first one is an attitude that only recognizes the meaningful language of the situation and which is concerned with showing the «veridical» nature of predicative statements concerning entities in the situation. <sup>6</sup> On the other hand, fidelity relates to the situation only in light of the event. This attitude originates from a decision: a nomination does not simply give a name to a pre-existing or pre-given event, it is rather a performative that *decides* that the event has taken place because the event itself *does not exist*. The subject that nominates the event is subsequently also the subject that decides, in the process of fidelity, which elements from the situation are and which are not related to the event. In Badiou's terminology, truth is a generic set that consists of those elements of the situation which are positively connected to the event by means of the procedure of fidelity.

<sup>6</sup> Badiou uses the term «veridical» to indicate that a proposition is true in the situation.

The opposition between truth and meaning and between fidelity and knowledge stems from the duality of event and situation. In a certain sense, Badiou's polemic with the poetic-hermeneutic strands of thought goes back to the question of whether the event has already taken place, to which Badiou's declaration attests, or whether the event is still to come, which is a conviction shared by many philosophers of the poetic-hermeneutic strands of thought, keeping the attitude of fidelity in suspense. <sup>7</sup>

## 2. Nancy's Poetic-Hermeneutic Account of Plurality as *Partage*

By bringing into play Nancy as a representative of poetic-hermeneutic thought, we will see that Badiou's critique of poetic thought will change in its appearance while a poetic conception of plurality takes shape. I will focus here mainly on Nancy's *Le partage des voix* since the structure of this text beautifully fits with the discussion

<sup>7</sup> In a passage on this Heideggerian "a-venir interminable" in the work of Nancy, Badiou "malignantly" remarks: «On a envie de dire: "Écoutez, si cette pensée est encore tout entière à venir, revenez nous voir quand au moins un morceau en sera venu!"» (Badiou 2004, 16). Cfr. also van der Heiden, *The Scintillation of the Event* (Badiou 2004, 102-105).

so far. It consists of two parts. The first part develops a critique of “classical” hermeneutics that in many respects runs parallel to Badiou’s, whereas the second part, drawing from Plato’s *Ion*, rethinks hermeneutics in relation to the activity of the poet as *hermeneus*. This latter part leads to Nancy’s conception of plurality as *partage*.

### 2.1. Nancy’s Critique of “Classical” Hermeneutics

In the first part of *Le partage des voix* (1982), Nancy establishes a difference between two conceptions of hermeneutics exemplified by the work of Heidegger and Ricoeur, respectively. When we compare his comments on Ricoeur’s hermeneutics with Badiou’s criticisms, we see the following striking resemblances. According to Nancy, Ricoeur’s hermeneutics departs from an «adhésion au sens», which means that meaning is a «pre-given» (*pré-donné*) of every interpretation (Nancy 1982, 17–21). Hence, Ricoeur’s hermeneutics invokes a primordial belonging to tradition which precedes every understanding or interpretation. In Nancy’s terms, Ricoeur’s hermeneutics invokes a “participation au sens.” Due to this participation, the pre-given meaning guides and orients from the outset every interpretation. However, this participation is simply presupposed and never explained or accounted for; it is a belief from which hermeneutics departs without interrogation: «La *croyance* herméneutique en général n’est pas autre chose que cette présupposition» (Nancy 1982, 21). As a consequence, and unlike Heidegger, Ricoeur’s hermeneutics does not interrogate the very opening up of this orientation that enables interpretation. In his account of the notion of meaning, Nancy will stress that the French *sens*, which also means direction or orientation, should be understood as the process of opening up this orientation, as we shall see below.

This criticism is clearly connected to Badiou’s critique of hermeneutics as a practice that reattaches what it interprets to an established universe of meaning. In fact, it is also closely connected to Badiou’s critique of the dialectics that is involved in Ricoeur’s account of the conflict of interpretations. As Nancy argues in his reading of Ricoeur, the movement of interpretation presupposes a lost origin, but it presupposes it in such a way that interpretation already participates in this origin and can, therefore, regain access to it (Nancy 1982, 18). This critique is almost verbatim the same as Badiou’s. For the latter, as we saw, the poetic-hermeneutic notion of withdrawal operates on the basis of a lost origin to which interpretation is still drawn and to which it can draw closer and closer in order to intuit again what it has lost, namely the pre-given meaning of being. For Nancy, this is just a description of Ricoeur’s account of the hermeneutic circle.

At the same time, however, Nancy develops a conception of Heidegger’s hermeneutics that is not liable to this criticism. Although one might wonder whether he succeeds in this respect in his reading of *Sein und Zeit*, his effort in the second part to follow up on Heidegger’s suggestions from *Unterwegs zur Sprache* is definitely convincing.

The direction that the first part of *Le partage des voix* thus suggests is to find interpretation in a conception of hermeneutics and meaning (*sens*) that accounts for the disclosure of the space of meaning that is presupposed by every interpretation. Nancy describes this as follows: «L’ouverture de l’*hermeneuein* est en ce sens ouverture du sens et au sens en tant qu’*autre*» (Nancy 1982, 39). Although Nancy does not use the terminology of the new or of the

beginning here, the overture of meaning introduces a «sens en tant qu'*autre*.» This implies a rupture with any pre-given participation to meaning and an interruption of every already established universe of meaning. Badiou's account of nomination aims to do something similar. Approached from Nancy's angle, nomination as proclamation or declaration turns out to be a poetic-hermeneutic category that goes at the heart of the overture of meaning, especially when taking into account Nancy's interpretation of hermeneutics in the second part of *Le partage des voix*.

## 2.2. Nancy's Reinterpretation of Hermeneutics as Partage

Nancy interprets the hierarchy between a primordial overture of meaning and a secondary practice of interpretation in the terms proposed by Plato's *Ion*. In this dialogue Socrates discusses with the rhapsode Ion what the characteristic activity of the poet and the rhapsode is. The term that characterizes both the poet and the rhapsode is «interpreter» (*hermeneus*): the poet interprets the god and the rhapsode interprets the poet. In this context, however, interpreting is not an inquiry into the meaning of the words that are being used. Quite the contrary, as Socrates indicates, both the poet and the rhapsode are out of their mind when they interpret. To interpret, *hermeneuein*, means first and foremost to lend a voice to the gods (in the case of the poet) or to recite the words of the poet (in the case of the rhapsode) without understanding. Both the poet and the rhapsode do so because they are driven by enthusiasm: a divine power (*theia dunamis*) works in and through them. Rather than communicating a pre-given meaning, they communicate this power and let their audiences share in this power. So the poet shares in a divine power and lets the rhapsode share in it, whereas the rhapsode, in turn, lets the audience share in it. It is this divine dispensation (*theia moira*) that Nancy translates as «partage divin» and which inspires his conception of *partage*.

This brief summary of some elements Nancy draws from Plato's dialogue already gives rise to a number of interesting issues in relation to Badiou. They all center around the concept of plurality that stems from it.

(1) First of all, the poetic articulation is not the interpretation of a pre-given meaning. In fact, the poet's interpreting lends a voice to the gods by means of the poet's sharing in a divine force (*theia dunamis*) that accounts for the poet's enthusiasm. What is crucial for Nancy's understanding of this divine force is that it only works — and thus only is — in its transmission and communication. This means, in terms of Plato's dialogue, that interpretation happens only in and through the sharing in and of the divine (*partage divin*). This implies that there is no separate unity of the divine force since it works only in and through a sharing. <sup>8</sup>

It is the figure of the rhapsode that relates this sharing in an irreducible way to the issue of plurality. Plato's dialogue famously depicts the transmission of the divine power by the image of iron rings that transmit the magnetic force by which they attract each other. The sharing of the divine power is only given in this plurality of rings, as Nancy indicates by referring to the role played by the rhapsode in this dialogue: «D'une part, la force divine se transmet intacte — mais justement elle *se transmet*, et c'est avec le deuxième anneau

<sup>8</sup>The divine and the god itself is only this enthusiasm, that is, this sharing and division. Neither the divine nor the god itself is ever given in poetry as a unity. As Nancy (1982, 68) writes: «Le divin est essentiellement partagé, donné, communiqué et partagé: c'est ce que signifie l'"en-thousiasme". En ce sens, le divin, ou le dieu même, c'est l'enthousiasme».

qu'elle manifeste pleinement cette propriété. La transmission exige la pluralité des anneaux [...]» (Nancy 1982, 69). In this way, the notion of *partage* gives rise to a conception of plurality that cannot be reduced to a unity. The intact nature of the divine force consists in and exists as its multiple transmissions.

When recalling Badiou's critique of hermeneutics, we see two important elements arising in Nancy's coining of *partage*. First of all, his account of being as *partage* or sharing in/sharing out stands in great contrast to Badiou's account of being as *l'impartageable*. In discussion with Ricoeur, it is clear that Badiou's emphasis on this latter notion can be understood as a critique of hermeneutics' affirmation of unity over multiplicity. Nancy's account of *partage*, however, proposes a model of a sharing of being that does not reduce plurality to a plurality of interpretations as Ricoeur does, but accounts for being itself as plural.

In the shift from Ricoeur to Nancy, we thus see *another* debate arising between Badiou's mathematical and the poetic-hermeneutic strands of thought concerning conceptions of the plurality of being. Badiou's account of multiplicity arises on the basis of axiomatic decisions and because of that, the multiplicity of mathematical orientations is based on a conflict concerning what counts and what does not count as being. Nancy's account of plurality is not based on conflict but is derived from the following insight of Heidegger's philosophy. As the latter notes in the *Entwürfe zur Geschichte des Seins als Metaphysik* (1998), the history of metaphysics interprets being as a being. That is, it deals with the question of that which all beings have in common (*koinon*) — namely being — as if this communality can be understood out of the oneness (*hen*) that characterizes every being (*Seiende*). As Heidegger (1998, 417) writes, «Der Vorrang des Seienden legt das Sein als das *koinon* aus dem *hen* fest. Der auszeichnende Charakter der Metaphysik ist entschieden. Das Eine als die einigende Einheit wird maßgebend für die nachkommende Bestimmung des Seins». Interestingly enough, Badiou quotes this passage in order to indicate that only an ontology of multiplicities can overcome the problems to which Heidegger points in the history of metaphysics. Yet, in order to arrive at this conclusion, he interprets the quote as follows: «Ainsi, c'est parce que l'un décide normativement de l'être que l'être est réduit au commun, à la généralité vide, et doit endurer la prééminence métaphysique de l'étant» (Badiou 1998, 26). However, Heidegger does not write that being is reduced to the common. Rather, his quote indicates that the common is interpreted as oneness. This indication opens up another way of developing an ontology of plurality, namely along the lines of thought Nancy suggests. Nancy overcomes the metaphysical determination of the *koinon* out of the *hen* by means of the notion of *partage* since this notion gives a primordial status to the common *without* reducing it to the oneness of a being. *Partage* expresses exactly what beings have in common, share with each other, without reducing this sharing to a being. His account of the divine force that is only given in and as the enthusiasm shared by poets, rhapsodes and audience, beautifully illustrates that that which all these enthusiasts have in common is not one essence of enthusiasm. Rather, enthusiasm is the in-common of the gods, the poets, the rhapsodes and the audience: it is what they share in and as their differences.

This difference between Badiou's conflict and Nancy's sharing is mirrored in another difference. In my description of the Badiou's critique of hermeneutics, the difference between mathematical and poetic-hermeneutic strands of thought concerned the direction and the orientation of thought: where poetic-hermeneutic thought longs for the lost origin, and thus wishes to return to

their provenance, mathematical thought moves forward by drawing the consequences of its axiomatic decisions. However, Nancy's account of *partage* is introduced in terms of communication and transmission. Clearly, this is not a movement back to the origin, but it is neither a form of drawing consequences. It presents us rather with a third alternative. The movement of sharing moves forward by a multiplication in a plurality of rings — the communication passes along poets, rhapsodes, listeners, and their differences. In this conception, the future is not the future anterior of statements that will have become veridical, as Badiou argues, but it is multiplication by communication. Thus, for Nancy, communication is never the process of sending and receiving a pre-given message, but as *partage* it is rather the very principle of multiplication by sharing.

The difference between sharing and conflict thus also concerns a difference between two orientations towards the future, and one might even say between different conceptions of the event. For Badiou, the temporality of the future directs the militant fidelity to an event that has already taken place. For Nancy, on the other hand, the experience of plurality is opened up in and by the moment of communication, contact and contiguity of different beings that are-in-common in that moment without fusing into one being.

Thus, a completely different perspective on the relation of the subject, or the being that we are, to the beings around us arises from these two models of plurality. Badiou's subject judges every being presented in the situation from the perspective of its connection (or not) to the event. Nancy's subject, on the other hand, is the subject that experiences how it is different and plural itself by the different and plural ways it experiences its being-in-common with the beings it encounters.

The concepts of plurality and multiplicity developed by Nancy and Badiou thus part ways concerning the question of *how thought touches (on) being*. Nancy's emphasis on contact and communication shows that the experience of being departs from the experience of the *partage* of being: being is given only as that which beings share — and which at the same time divides them as singular beings. The thought of being thus stems from a spatial configuration, namely contiguity. By contrast, Badiou (1998, 96) claims that mathematical thought «touche à l'être». To touch (on) being means in this context to make contact in and as axiomatic decision and judgment on being. This latter element shows that it is not the *koinon* of being that is found in the thoughtful touch of mathematics but it rather finds the conflict with other conceptions of being.

(2) Also in a second respect, the text of Nancy forms an intriguing point of departure to assess Badiou's account of poetic-hermeneutic thought. As I noted in the introduction of this paper, Badiou characterizes these strands of thought by the suture of philosophy to poetics. *Le partage des voix* provides us with an extreme version of this suture when it describes the genre of poetics. The plurality to which the *partage divin* gives rise is reflected in the genre of poetics. Every poet is inspired by the muses but he always speaks only in one style as Socrates notes. Although all the poets share their enthusiasm, they are each inspired differently. Consequently, the poetic genre in general is never and nowhere expressed or announced. It is only announced in the plurality of its different poetic articulations and poetic styles. As Nancy (1982, 66) writes:

Il y a donc un partage, une différence originaire des genres ou des voix poétiques — et peut-être, en sous-main, un partage des genres poétique

et philosophique. Il n'y a pas de poésie générale, et quant à la poétique générale dont on a par principe admis l'existence, elle restera introuvable: mais c'est ici bien sûr qu'elle s'expose. Il n'y a que des voix singulières, contrastées, et l'enthousiasme est avant tout l'entrée dans une telle singularité.

Nancy's idea of being as a singular plural is anticipated in this description of the poetic genre which is only given in its singular and plural interpretations by multiple poets. This ultimately justifies the claim that Nancy's conception of plurality as *partage* is a poetic-hermeneutic conception.

Moreover, the above quote testifies to a suture of philosophy to poetics in the strongest sense possible when it suggests «un partage des genres poétiques et philosophiques». Apparently, the plurality of poetic genres comprises the plurality of philosophical genres. Nancy elaborates this suggestion later in the text when he discusses the main characteristic of the philosophical genre that speaks out of Socrates' comments: it is the task of philosophy to master the truth of the other genres (in this case the poetic and rhapsodic genre). Yet, according to Nancy, two difficulties arise in this Socratic conviction.

First, the truth of poetic discourse is the enthusiasm and the magnetic force on which it depends. These characteristics are exactly that which cannot be mastered. In this sense, as Nancy notes, the philosopher masters only that it cannot master poetic discourse: «Maîtriser l'immaîtrisable [...] fait l'enjeu et le jeu le plus savant du philosophe» (Nancy 1982, 78).

Secondly, Nancy notes that in order for Socrates to master the poetic discourses he adopts the voice of the rhapsode Ion and becomes an *interpreter* of Homer. This means that in order to master the other discourses, the philosopher plays the role of the philosopher, the rhapsode and the poet. Thus he stages the dialogue, as Nancy (1982, 78) writes:

Pour le construire, cependant, il aura fallu mettre en scène, prendre des rôles, interpréter le rhapsode et réciter Homère, dédoubler le philosophe, *interpréter* la philosophie. Il aura fallu écrire, choisir un genre (un genre de *mimesis*), composer le dialogue. *L'hermeneia* du dialogue déborde irrésistiblement la maîtrise que le dialogue pense et présente, et qui est la maîtrise du procédé herméneutique.

This staging of the dialogue at the heart of the philosophical effort to master the genres of the poet and the rhapsode is itself a hermeneutic enterprise. This is the reason why, ultimately, there is indeed a *partage* of philosophy and poetics. What they share is the activity of the interpreter of which the dialogue testifies that it cannot be mastered. (Let me emphasize once more that interpreting means first and foremost articulating, staging, and announcing — and not finding a pre-given meaning).

In this context, Plato plays an even more significant role than Socrates because he stages, as writer of the dialogue, all the characters. Plato is *le partage des voix*, the sharing and the plurality of all the voices that are staged in this dialogue. Unlike dialectics, which aims to reconcile different, conflicting voices and interpretations, the «dialogicity» (*dialogicité*) that according to Nancy speaks from Plato's dialogues is rather a sharing of voices (*partage des voix*) in and as communication. Plurality as *partage* thus suggests a scene of multiple and perhaps even conflicting voices and interpretations that does not privilege

the one over the many but discerns in communication the principle of multiplication and differentiation itself.

### 3. Decision and Communication: On a Twofold Heritage of Plato

What has become of the conflict between mathematical and poetic thought that Badiou stages in *L'être et l'événement* as well as other texts? It is clear that his conception of poetic-hermeneutic thought is marked by a number of characteristics that belong to “classical” hermeneutics alone. By choosing his adversaries in this way, Badiou’s critique of poetic-hermeneutic thought tends to avoid a confrontation with strands of this thought that develop a genuine alternative ontology of plurality along poetic-hermeneutic lines of thought. The comparison with Nancy indicated the following: (1) Nancy’s poetic-hermeneutic approach develops a similar critique of “classical” hermeneutics as Badiou does. (2) As a consequence, certain poetic-hermeneutic remainders in Badiou’s work remain unthought. His account of nomination as disclosing a new realm of meaning is similar to the poetic-hermeneutic discussion of the primordial meaning of hermeneutics as announcement. (3) Finally, the confrontation with the ontology of plurality Nancy develops, indicates that there are indeed a number of serious differences between mathematical and poetic-hermeneutic thought.

Perhaps the most fundamental difference concerns the question what counts as plurality. Here, the issue concerns the question of how thought touches (on) being and how it discloses a new discourse on being: Is this discourse opened up by an axiomatic decision or is it opened up by the experience of the *partage* in the encounter of multiple beings? Does thought touch (on) being by decision or by communication?

To indicate how these two determinations of thought are connected, let me finish this comparison with a brief note on one strange similarity between Badiou’s mathematical and Nancy’s poetic-hermeneutic orientation: their shared platonic background. Badiou argues that the distinction between the poetic and mathematical orientation of philosophy concerns a distinction between the pre-platonic poem and the platonic matheme (Badiou 1988, 143). This is why Badiou calls himself a Platonist. To some extent, this is understandable. The emphasis on the matheme to characterize Plato’s thought has a long history and is also clearly present in Heidegger’s assessment of Plato and his subsequent dismissal of Plato as the philosopher inaugurating the history of metaphysics. Badiou returns to Plato the mathematician and the metaphysician, albeit this time the metaphysician of plurality.<sup>9</sup>

However, Badiou’s claim that the poetic orientation of philosophy is pre-platonic is put to the test by Nancy’s reading of the *Ion*. *Le partage des voix* shows that the poetic-hermeneutic account of plurality as *partage* has its roots in the platonic text itself. Hence, both the mathematical and the poetic-hermeneutic reappraisal of plurality is inspired by Plato’s dialogues: the early dialogue *Ion* accounts for interpretation in terms of a sharing in the divine force; the later dialogue *Parmenides* draws the consequences from the hypothesis that the one is not. It is in this sense that both contemporary philosophies are platonic.

Of course, this latter characterization — “platonic” — is ambiguous and

<sup>9</sup> In addition, his explorations of the difference between Plato’s and Aristotle’s conception of the ontological status of mathematics deepen his platonic conviction, cfr. Badiou (1998, 39-59 and 95-118).

depends on which Plato one highlights: Plato the mathematician or Plato the writer of dialogues; Plato describing being as multiple following the hypothesis “the one is not” in the *Parmenides* or Plato staging and interpreting the voices of all his characters in the *Ion*. Moreover, when looking more closely, it turns out that the Plato’s that are presented here are in both cases at best partial Plato’s. Badiou rejects Plato’s remark that philosophy, unlike mathematics, does not depart from a hypothesis or an axiom but rather aims to find the first principle and true point of departure (*arche*). <sup>10</sup> Especially in light of the *Parmenides* this is a crucial rejection: by taking the hypothesis as axiomatic point of departure rather than as something that needs to be left behind in order to reach the true beginning, Badiou does not discuss the rest of the *Parmenides*. From other passages, it is clear that this dialogue develops a dialectical method that does not only draw the consequences of a given hypothesis *but also of its negation*, as Parmenides remarks: «You must not only consider what happens if a particular hypothesis is true, but also what happens if it is not true» (*Parmenides*, 136a; translation taken from the Loeb-edition). Nancy’s Plato, on the other hand, places us from the outset in the position of being abandoned from understanding. Yet, does not such an emphasis on abandonment neglect the importance of understanding in a platonic framework? <sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Cfr. Badiou (1998, 32-33).

Plato, thus, inspires ontologies of plurality but he does so for readers who affirm only certain dimensions of his work while forgetting or even rejecting others. To a certain extent, this need not surprise us since this is the typical relation one has to a heritage. This relation always combines the necessity of decision and communication. With respect to what is handed down, one has to decide what one affirms; it is exactly in and through this decision that the communication of tradition takes place. <sup>12</sup> Given the possibility of multiple decisions and plural affirmations, it is this combination of decision and communication, decision as communication, and communication as decision that forms the heart of every pluralization of any heritage. It is therefore, perhaps, not too surprising that the heritage of Plato for ontologies of plurality bifurcates exactly in this twofold way of thought touching (on) being: as decision and as communication.

<sup>11</sup> A more elaborate account of the problems arising here are discussed in van der Heiden (2014), Chapter 3, as well as in van der Heiden (2015a, 195-209).

<sup>12</sup> Cfr. Derrida 1993, 40.

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