

ISSN 1751-8229

IJŽS Volume Two, Number Three

# LANGUAGE, VIOLENCE AND NON-VIOLENCE

Slavoj Žižek

In his “Critique of Violence,” Walter Benjamin raises the question: “Is any non-violent resolution of conflict possible?”(243<sup>1</sup>) His answer is that such a non-violent resolution of conflict is indeed possible in what he calls “relationships among private persons,” in courtesy, sympathy and trust: “there is a sphere of human agreement that is non-violent to the extent that it is wholly inaccessible to violence: the proper sphere of ‘understanding,’ language.’(245)

This thesis of Benjamin belongs to the mainstream tradition in which the prevalent idea of language and the symbolic order is that of the medium of reconciliation and mediation, of peaceful co-existence, as opposed to a violent medium of immediate and raw confrontation.<sup>2</sup> In language, instead of exerting direct violence on each other, we are meant to debate, to exchange words, and such an exchange, even when it is aggressive, presupposes a minimum recognition of the other. The entry into language and the renunciation of violence are often understood as two aspects of one and the

same gesture: 'Speaking is the foundation and structure of socialization, and happens to be characterized by the renunciation of violence,' as a text by Jean-Marie Muller written for UNESCO tells us.<sup>3</sup> Since man is a 'speaking animal,' this means that the renunciation of violence defines the very core of being-human: 'it is actually the principles and methods of non-violence ... that constitute the humanity of human beings, the coherence and relevance of moral standards based both on convictions and a sense of responsibility,' so that violence is 'indeed a radical perversion of humanity.'<sup>4</sup> Insofar as language gets infected by violence, this occurs under the influence of contingent 'pathological' circumstances which distort the inherent logic of symbolic communication.

What if, however, humans exceed animals in their capacity for violence precisely because they *speak*?<sup>5</sup> When we perceive something as an act of violence, we measure it by a presupposed standard of what the "normal" non-violent situation is – and the highest form of violence is the imposition of this standard with reference to which some events appear as "violent." This is why language itself, the very medium of non-violence, of mutual recognition, involves unconditional violence. So, perhaps, the fact that *reason* (*ratio*) and *race* have the same root tells us something: language, not primitive egotistic interests, is the first and greatest divider, it is because of language that we and our neighbors (can) "live in different worlds" even when we live on the same street. What this means is that verbal violence is not a secondary distortion, but the ultimate resort of every specifically human violence. Take the example of anti-Semitic pogroms, which can stand in for all racist violence. What the perpetrators of pogroms find intolerable and rage-provoking, what they react to, is not the immediate reality of Jews, but to the image/figure of the 'Jew' which circulates and has been constructed in their tradition. The catch, of course, is that one single individual cannot distinguish in any simple way between real Jews and their anti-Semitic image: this image overdetermines the way I experience real Jews themselves and, furthermore, it affects the way Jews experience themselves. What makes a real Jew that an anti-Semite encounters on the street "intolerable," what the anti-Semite tries to destroy when he attacks the Jew, the true target of his fury, is this fantasmatic dimension.

The same principle applies to every political protest: when workers protest their exploitation, they do not protest a simple reality, but an experience of their real predicament made meaningful through language. Reality in itself, in its stupid being-

there, is never intolerable: it is language, its symbolization, which makes it such. So precisely when we are dealing with the scene of a furious crowd, attacking and burning buildings and cars, lynching people, etc., we should never forget the placards they are carrying and the words which sustain and justify their acts. It was Heidegger who elaborated this feature at the formal-ontological level, when, in his reading of essence /*Wesen*/ as a verb (“essencing”), he provided a de-essentialized notion of essence. Traditionally, “essence” refers to a stable core that guarantees the identity of a thing. For Heidegger, “essence” is something that depends on the historical context, on the epochal disclosure of being that occurs in and through language; his expression “*Wesen der Sprache*” does not mean “the essence of language,” but its “essencing,” the making of essences that is the work of language,

“language bringing things into their essence, language ‘moving us’ so that things matter to us in a particular kind of way, so that paths are made within which we can move among entities, and so that entities can bear on each other as the entities they are. ... We share an originary language when the world is articulated in the same style for us, when we ‘listen to language,’ when we ‘let it say its saying to us.’”<sup>6</sup>

For a medieval Christian, the essence of gold resides in its incorruptibility and divine sheen which make it a divine metal. For us, it is either a flexible resource to be used for industrial purposes or the stuff appropriate for aesthetic purposes. Or, for Catholics, the castrato voice was once the very voice of angels prior to the Fall. For us today, it is a monstrosity. This change in our sensitivity is sustained by language; it hinges on the shift in our symbolic universe. A fundamental violence exists in this “essencing” ability of language: our world is given a partial twist, it loses its balanced innocence, one partial color gives the tone of the Whole.

There is, however, another violent aspect of language absent in Heidegger, which is the focus of Lacan’s theory of the symbolic order. Throughout his work, Lacan varies Heidegger’s motif of language as the house of being: language is not man’s creation and instrument, it is man who “dwells” in language: “Psychoanalysis should be the science of language inhabited by the subject.”<sup>7</sup> Lacan’s “paranoiac” twist, his additional Freudian turn of the screw, comes from his characterization of this house as a

*torture-house*: “In the light of the Freudian experience, man is a subject caught in and tortured by language.”<sup>8</sup> Not only does man dwell in the “prison-house of language” (the title of Fredric Jameson’s early book on structuralism), he dwells in a torture-house of language: the entire psychopathology deployed by Freud, from conversion-symptoms inscribed into the body up to total psychotic breakdowns, are scars of this permanent torture, so many signs of an original and irremediable gap between subject and language, so many signs that man cannot ever be at home in his own home. This is what Heidegger ignores: this dark torturing other side of our dwelling in language – and this is why there is also no place for the Real of *jouissance* in Heidegger’s edifice, since the torturing aspect of language concerns primarily the vicissitudes of libido. This is also why, in order to get the truth to speak, it is not enough to suspend the subject’s active intervention and let language itself speak – as Elfriede Jelinek put it with extraordinary clarity: “Language should be tortured to tell the truth.” It should be twisted, denaturalized, extended, condensed, cut and reunited, made to work against itself. Language as the “big Other” is not an agent of wisdom to whose message we should attune ourselves, but a place of cruel indifference and stupidity. The most elementary form of torturing one’s language is called poetry – imagine what a complex form like sonnet does to language: it forces the free flow of speech into a Procrustean bed of a fixed shape of rhythm and rhymes... So what about Heidegger’s procedure of listening to the soundless word of language itself, of bringing out the truth that already dwells in it? No wonder late Heidegger’s thinking is poetic - recall the means he uses to do this: can one imagine a torture more violent than what he does in, say, his famous reading of Parmenides’s proposition “thinking-speaking and being are the same”? To extract the intended truth from it, he has to refer to literal meaning of words (*legein* as gathering), to counter-intuitively displace the accent and scansion of the sentence, to translate single terms in a strongly-interpretative descriptive way, etc.

This is also the ultimate reason why, against Heidegger’s historicization of subject as the Modern Age agent of technological mastery, against his replacing of “subject” with *Dasein* as the name for the essence of being-human, Lacan stuck to the problematic term “subject”: when Lacan implies that Heidegger misses a crucial dimension of subjectivity, his point is not a silly-humanist argument that Heidegger “passivizes” man too much into an instrument of the revelation of Being and thus ignores

human creativity, etc. Lacan's point is, on the contrary, that Heidegger misses the properly traumatic impact of the very "passivity" of being caught in language, the tension between human animal and language: there is "subject" because the human animal doesn't "fit" language, the Lacanian "subject" is the tortured, mutilated, subject. Insofar as the status of the Lacanian subject is real, i.e., insofar as the real Thing is ultimately (the impossible core of) the subject itself, one should apply to the subject Lacan's definition of the Thing as "that /part, aspect/ of the real which suffers from the signifier" – the most elementary dimension of the subject is not activity, but passivity, enduring. This is how Lacan locates rituals of initiation which perform a violent cut onto the body, mutilating it:

"The rituals of initiation assume the form of the changing of form of these desires, of conferring on them in this way a function through which the subject's being identifies itself or announces itself as such, through which the subject, if one can put it this way, fully become a man, but also a woman. The *mutilation* serves here to orientate desire, enabling it to assume precisely this function of index, of something which is realized and which can only articulate itself, express itself, in a *symbolic beyond*, a beyond which is the one we today call being, a realization of being in the subject."<sup>9</sup>

The gap that separates Lacan from Heidegger is here clearly discernible precisely on account of their proximity, i.e., of the fact that, in order to designate the symbolic function at its most elementary, Lacan still uses Heidegger's term "being": in a human being, desires lose their mooring in biology, they are operative only insofar as they are inscribed within the horizon of Being sustained by language; however, in order for this transposition from the immediate biological reality of the body to the symbolic space to take place, it has to live a mark of torture in the body in the guise of its mutilation. It is thus not enough to say that "the Word became flesh": what one should add is that, in order for the Word to inscribe itself into flesh, a part of the flesh – the proverbial Shylockian pound of flesh - has to be sacrificed. Since there is no pre-established harmony between Word and flesh, it is only through such a sacrifice that the flesh becomes receptive for the Word.

This brings us, finally, to the topic of *jouissance*. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe located very precisely the gap that separates Lacan's interpretation of *Antigone* from Heidegger's (to which Lacan otherwise abundantly refers): what is totally missing in Heidegger is not only the dimension of the real of *jouissance*, but, above all, the dimension of the "between-two-deaths" (the symbolic and the real) which designates Antigone's subjective position after she is excommunicated from polis by Creon. In exact symmetry with her brother Polynices who is dead in reality but denied the symbolic death, the rituals of burial, Antigone finds herself dead symbolically, excluded from the symbolic community, while biologically and subjectively still alive. In Agamben's terms, Antigone finds herself reduced to "bare life," to a position of *homo sacer*, whose exemplary case in the XXth century is that of the inmates of the concentration camps. The stakes of Heidegger's omission are thus very high, they concern the ethico-political crux of the XXth century, the "totalitarian" catastrophe in its extreme deployment – so this omission is quite consistent with Heidegger's inability to resist the Nazi temptation:

"But the 'between-two-deaths' is the hell which our century realized or still promises to realize, and it is to this that Lacan replies and to what he wants to make psychoanalysis responsible. Did he not say that politics is the 'hole' of metaphysics? The scene with Heidegger – and there is one – is in its entirety located here."<sup>10</sup>

This also accounts for the disturbing ambiguity of Heidegger's description of the death in extermination camps: this death is no longer authentic death, the individual's assuming of one's death as the possibility of his highest impossibility, but just another anonymous industrial-technological process – people do not really "die" in the camps, they are just industrially exterminated... Heidegger not only obscenely suggests that the victims burned in the camps somehow did not die "authentically," thereby translating their utter suffering into subjective "non-authenticity." The question he fails to raise is precisely: how did THEY subjectivize (relate to) their predicament? Their death was an industrial process of extermination for their executioners, *not for themselves*.

Francois Balmes makes here a perspicuous remark that it is as if Lacan's implicit clinical reproach to Heidegger's existential analytic of *Dasein* as "being-towards-death" is

that it is appropriate only for neurotics and fails to account for psychotics<sup>11</sup>: a psychotic subject occupies an existential position for which there is no place in Heidegger's mapping, the position of someone who in a way "survives his own death." Psychotics no longer fit Heidegger's description of *Dasein's* engaged existence, their life no longer moves in the coordinates of freely engaging in a futural project against the background of assuming one's past: their life is outside "care /*Sorge*/" their being is no longer directed "towards death."

This excess of *jouissance* that resists symbolization (logos) is the reason why, in the last two decades of his teaching, Lacan (sometimes almost pathetically) insists that he considers himself an anti-philosopher, someone who rebels against philosophy: philosophy is onto-logy, its basic premise is, as already Parmenides, the first philosopher, put it, "thinking and being are the same," the mutual accord between thinking (logos as reason/speech) and being – up to Heidegger, the Being philosophy has in mind is always the being whose house is language, the being sustained by language, the being whose horizon is opened by language, or, as Wittgenstein put it, the limits of my language are the limits of my world. Against this onto-logical premise of philosophy, Lacan focuses on the real of *jouissance* as something which, although it is far from being simply external to language (it is rather "ex-timate" with regard to it), resists symbolization, remains a foreign kernel within it, appears within it as a rupture, cut, gap, inconsistency or impossibility:

"/.../ I challenge whichever philosopher to account now for the relation that is between the emergence of the signifier and the way *jouissance* relates to being. /.../ No philosophy, I say, meets us here today. The wretched aborted freaks of philosophy which we drag behind us from the beginning of the last /19<sup>th</sup>/ century as the habits that are falling apart, are nothing but a way to frisk rather than to confront this question which is the only question about truth and which is called, and named by Freud, the death drive, the primordial masochism of *jouissance*. /.../ All philosophical speech escapes and withdraws here."<sup>12</sup>

It is in this sense that Lacan designates his position as the one of the "realism of *jouissance*" – realism of *jouissance* whose "natural" enemy cannot but appear Hegel's "panlogism" as the climactic point of ontology, of logic (self-deployment of logos) as the

total explanation for being, through which being loses its opacity and becomes totally transparent... But does Lacan not proceed all too fast here? Are things with Hegel really so simple? Is the obverse of Hegel's basic thesis "there is nothing which is not logos" not, following Lacan's "formulas of sexuation," the assertion of a non-All - "not-all is logos," i.e., logos is not-all, it is corroded and truncated from within by antagonisms and ruptures, never fully itself?

Maybe, Lacan was somehow obscurely aware of all this, as is indicated in the above-quoted passage by his curious and unexpected limitation of his brutal dismissal of philosophy to the "wretched aborted freaks of philosophy which we drag behind us from the beginning of the last /19<sup>th</sup>/ century," i.e., to the *post*-Hegelian thought. That is to say, the obvious thing would have been to say that it is precisely the post-Hegelian thought which breaks with onto-logy, asserting the primacy of a trans-logical Will or Life - the anti-logos (anti-philosophy) that runs from late Schelling through Schopenhauer to Nietzsche. It is as if Lacan here learned Heidegger's lesson: Marx's formula "being determines consciousness" is not radical enough - all the talk about the actual life of engaged subjectivity as opposed to a "mere speculative thought" remains within the confines of ontology, because (as Heidegger demonstrated) being can only arise through logos. The difference from Heidegger is that Lacan, instead of accepting this accord (sameness) between Being and logos, tries to move outside of it, to a dimension of the real indicated by the impossible joint between subject and *jouissance*. No wonder, then, that, with regard to anxiety, Lacan prefers Kierkegaard to Heidegger: he perceives Kierkegaard as the anti-Hegel for whom the paradox of Christian faith signals a radical break with the ancient Greek ontology (in contrast to Heidegger's reduction of Christianity to a moment in the process of the decline of the Greek ontology in medieval metaphysics). Faith is an existential jump into what (from the ontological view) cannot but appear as madness, it is a crazy decision unwarranted by any reason - Kierkegaard's God is effectively "beyond Being", a God of the Real, not the God of philosophers. Which is why, again, Lacan would accept Heidegger's famous statement, from the 1920s, when he abandoned Catholic Church, that religion is a mortal enemy of philosophy - but he would see this as the reason to stick to the core of the Real in the religious experience.



The Lacanian “subject” names a gap in the symbolic, its status is real – this is why, as Balmes pointed out, in his crucial seminar on the logic of the fantasy (1966-67), after more than a decade of struggling with Heidegger, Lacan accomplishes his paradoxical and (for someone who adheres to Heidegger’s notion of modern philosophy) totally unexpected move from Heidegger back to Descartes, to Cartesian *cogito*. There really is a paradox here: Lacan first accepts Heidegger’s point that the Cartesian *cogito*, which grounds modern science and its mathematicized universe, announces the highest forgetting of Being; but for Lacan, the Real of *jouissance* is precisely external to Being, so that what is for Heidegger the argument AGAINST *cogito* is for Lacan the argument FOR *cogito* - the real of *jouissance* can only be approached when we exit the domain of being. This is why, for Lacan, not only is *cogito* not to be reduced to the self-transparency of pure thought, but, paradoxically, *cogito* IS the subject of the unconscious – the gap/cut in the order of Being in which the real of *jouissance* breaks in.

Of course, this *cogito* is the *cogito* “in becoming,” not yet the *res cogitans*, the thinking substance which fully participates in Being and in logos. In the seminar on the logic of fantasy, Lacan reads the truth of Descartes’ *cogito ergo sum* more radically than in his earlier seminars, where he played endlessly on the variations of “subverting” the subject. He started with decentering being with regard to thought - “I am not where I think,” the core of our being (“*Kern unseres Wesens*”) is not in my (self)consciousness; however, he quickly became aware that such a reading leaves the path all too open to the irrationalist *Lebensphilosophie* topic of Life deeper than mere thinking or language, which runs counter Lacan basic thesis that the Freudian unconscious is “structured like a language,” thoroughly “rational”/discursive. So he passed to a much more refined “I think where I am not,” which decenters thinking with regard to my Being, the awareness of my full presence: the Unconscious is a purely virtual (in-existing, insisting) Other Place of a thought which escapes my being. Then, there is a different punctuation: “I think: ‘therefore I am’” – my Being devalued to an illusion generated by my thought; etc. What all these versions share is the accent on the gap that separates *cogito* from *sum*, thought from being – Lacan’s aim was to undermine the illusion of their overlapping by way of pointing up a fissure in the apparent homogeneity of thinking-being. It was only towards the end of his teaching that he asserted their overlapping – a negative one, for sure. That is to say, Lacan finally grasps the most radical zero-point of the Cartesian

*cogito* as the point of the negative intersection between being and thinking: the vanishing point at which *I don't think* AND *I am not*. I AM NOT: I am not a substance, a thing, an entity, I am reduced to a void in the order of being, to a gap, a *beance*. (Recall how, for Lacan, the discourse of science presupposes the foreclosure of the subject – to put it in naïve terms, in it, subject is reduced to zero, a scientific proposition should be valid for anyone who repeats the same experiment. The moment we have to include the subject's position of enunciation, we are no longer in science, but in a discourse of wisdom or initiation.) I DON'T THINK: here, again, Lacan paradoxically accepts Heidegger's thesis that (modern mathematized) science "doesn't think" – but for him, this precisely means that it breaks out of the frame of onto-logy, of thinking as logos correlative to Being. As pure *cogito*, I don't think, I am reduced to "pure (form of) thought" which coincides with its opposite, i.e., which has no content and is as such non-thinking. The tautology of thinking is self-canceling in the same way as the tautology of being, which is why, for Lacan, the "I am that which I am" enounced by the burning bush to Moses on the Mount Sinai indicates a God beyond Being, God as Real.<sup>13</sup>

The importance of this Lacan's assertion of *cogito* is that, with regard to the couple language-world, it assures a point external to it, a minimal point of singular universality which is literally world-less, trans-historical. This means we are condemned to our world, to the hermeneutic horizon of our finitude, or, as Gadamer put it, to the impenetrable background of historical "prejudices" which predetermine the field of what we can see and understand. Every world is sustained by language, and every "spoken" language sustains a world – this is what Heidegger aimed at in his thesis on language as a "house of being" - is this effectively not our spontaneous ideology? There is an endlessly differentiated, complex, reality, which we, individuals and communities embedded in it, always experience from a particular, finite, perspective of our historical world. What "democratic materialism" furiously rejects is the notion that there can be an infinite universal Truth which cuts across this multitude of worlds – in politics, this means "totalitarianism" which imposes its truth as universal. This is why one should reject, say, Jacobins, who imposed onto the plurality of the French society their universal notions of equality and other truths, and thus necessarily ended in terror... In his *Logiques des mondes*, Badiou formulates the axiom of "democratic materialism": "*There is nothing but bodies and languages ...*," to which materialist dialectics adds "*... with the exception of*

*truths.*"<sup>14</sup> So there is another version of the democratic-materialist axiom: "All that takes place in today's society is the dynamics of post-modern globalization, and the (conservative-nostalgic, fundamentalist, Old Leftist, nationalist, religious...) reactions and resistances to it" – to which, of course, materialist dialectics adds its proviso: "... with the exception of the radical-emancipatory (Communist) politics of truth."

Of course, the only way for us to articulate this truth is within language – by way of torturing language. As already Hegel knew it, when we think, we think in language against language. This brings us back to Benjamin: could we not apply his distinction of mythic violence and divine violence to the two modes of violence we were dealing with? The violence of language to which Heidegger refers is "mythic violence": it is a *sprach-bildende Gewalt*, a language-forming violence, to paraphrase Benjamin's definition of mythic violence as *staats-bildend* – the force of *mythos* as the primordial narrativization/symbolization, to put it in Badiou's terms, the violent imposition of the transcendental coordinates of a World onto the multiplicity of Being. The violence of thinking (and of poetry, if we understand it differently from Heidegger) is, on the contrary, the case of what Benjamin calls "divine violence," it is *sprach-zerstoerend*, language-destroying twisting of language in order to enable a trans-symbolic real of a Truth to transpire in it. The rehabilitation of Descartes is thus only a first step: one should follow it by a rehabilitation of Plato.

And one should make a step further here: the answer to Benjamin's question with which we began is not simply negative. There *is* a "language" which is outside violence, but Benjamin is looking for it at the wrong place. It is not the language of peaceful communication among subjects, but the language of pure mathematics, this joyful study of multiplicities. Should we still call it language? Lacan's choice was a no: he played with terms like "mathem" or "writing."

- <sup>1</sup> Numbers in brackets refer to pages in “Critique of Violence,” *Walter Benjamin. Selected Writings*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1996.
- <sup>2</sup> The idea propagated by Habermas (see Jurgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Vol. 1 and 2, New York: Beacon Press 1985), but also not strange to a certain Lacan (see Jacques Lacan, “The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis,” in *Ecrits*, New York: Norton 2006).
- <sup>3</sup> Jean-Marie Muller, “Non-Violence in Education,” available online at [http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/file\\_download.php/fa99ea234f4accb0ad43040e1d60809cmuller\\_en.pdf](http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/file_download.php/fa99ea234f4accb0ad43040e1d60809cmuller_en.pdf).
- <sup>4</sup> Muller, op.cit.
- <sup>5</sup> See Clement Rosset, *Le reel. Traite de l'idiotie*, Paris: Les Editions de Minuit 2004, pp.112-114.
- <sup>6</sup> Mark Wrathall, *How to Read Heidegger*, London: Granta 2005, p. 94-95.
- <sup>7</sup> Lacan, *Ecrits*, p. 276.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>9</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Le desir et son interpretation* (unpublished seminar), 20 May 1959.
- <sup>10</sup> Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, “De l'ethique: a propos d'Antigone,” in *Lacan avec les philosophes*, Paris: Albin Michel 1991, p. 28.
- <sup>11</sup> Francois Balmes, *Ce que Lacan dit de l'etre*, Paris: PUF 1999, p. 73.
- <sup>12</sup> Jacques Lacan, *L'objet de la psychanalyse* (unpublished seminar), 8 June 1966.
- <sup>13</sup> Here we can also establish the link with Meillassoux's design of speculative materialism: the scientific mathematized Real is outside the transcendental correlation of logos and being. See Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, London: Continuum Books 2008.
- <sup>14</sup> Alain Badiou, *Logiques des mondes*, Paris: Editions du Seuil 2006, p. 9.