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[Issue Eight]

Alexander García Düttmann. *The Memory of Thought: An Essay on Heidegger and Adorno*. **Trans. Nicholas Walker. London: Continuum, 2002. ISBN: 0826459013.**

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What does it mean to call an event by and to conceptualise an event in terms of its name? In the footsteps of Odysseus, we cunning moderns are at less risk than Polyphemus of confusing or conflating the name and the thing. In fact, so clever have we become in dissociating ourselves from our names and disguising ourselves by means of multiple names that it is hardly surprising that the name is now often considered to be a merely arbitrary linguistic mark. Even were this consideration the case, convention governs the use of names in language, which can never be private, and rules of argumentation demonstrably illegitimate or regulate the acceptance of invalid or willful inferences. When an event is named in philosophical discourse, and claims are made about the name evoked, it would appear that reflexive or conceptual criteria of argumentative communication must in some way have been either implicitly or explicitly adopted. Claims are made *about* the name, and the name comes to serve as an *example*: in each case, the name is conceptualised in accordance with the anticipated ideal conditions of rational discourse, the conceptual criteria governing valid argumentative reasoning and conceptual thought. If names are mere tokens in conceptual discourse, what is *specific* to and *named* in the event is lost. Without conceptual discourse, however, nothing can be said of or about the name.

Names are given to particular events, and every event that is named and recognised as such transforms what has been and what is to come. Certain names have the metonymic function of referring to abstract totalities – such as *the West*, and *history*. Names can in this way serve to inaugurate and establish totalities. Motivating Düttmann's essay is the question of what happens when the name given to the experience of a *particular* event is referred to the totality of *history*, thus inaugurating and establishing this totality. Guiding his essay (first published in 1991 as *Das Gedächtnis des Denkens: Versuch über Heidegger und Adorno*) is the thought that *every* name has a tendency to produce a totalising effect, even if neither the name nor event are exhausted in this effect.

Precisely in accordance with its stated purpose, Düttmann's approach is neither a systematic investigation of the concept of the name, nor a comparative examination of the reciprocal influences or unbridgeable gaps comprising the history of philosophy. His method and argument differentiate his work from a number of studies on the relationship between Adorno and Heidegger's thought: Adorno's critique of the "ontological need," being and existence, and the "jargon of authenticity" remain largely and avowedly undiscussed. The fact that Düttmann's essay cannot be *relied* upon in this conventional sense reflects its singular strength and methodology: a resistance towards totalising attempts which, indifferently communicating a given content, would impose a system of equivalences, a fixity of theme, and a leveling out of positions. Düttmann's argument is not conducted from the perspective of one or the other thinker, nor is it an attempt to unify both. In homage to "principled overdetermination," a mode of argumentation identified by Adorno as characteristic of the essay form, and which seeks to respond to "blind spots" evading conceptual thought, Düttmann deciphers instances in Heidegger and Adorno's work in which *the name and the event are affirmed*.

The name Adorno gives to history, the history of an inexorable advance in control over humans and nature, the path of a world-spirit which perpetuates catastrophe, is *Auschwitz*. Auschwitz retrospectively institutes the negative unity of history, which yet makes it possible to construct a universal history of negativity, and avert "dawning catastrophe" – the complete destruction of the non-identical. By contrast, with explicit reference to Hölderlin, Heidegger calls for the German people to assume its historical mission and calling through a recovery and transformation of the beginning of historical-spiritual existence in the age of the Greeks. *Germania* names the historical-spiritual mission and task endowed to the German people, who in the threat of spiritual decline are given the possibility of self-assertion and unity. According to Düttmann, the decision made in philosophy to think from or in terms of *Germania*, or to and after *Auschwitz*, is subject to the price of an undecidability conditioned by, and peculiar to, the name, an ineliminable blindness and opacity to which one is subjected in naming. Heidegger and Adorno have *acknowledged* the power of the name, and *fallen victim* to this power.

How is the *power of the name* to be understood here? Following Adorno, although names are other than concepts, the name cannot be isolated: it is not separate from, prior to, or beyond the concept. The name must be considered in its irreducible relation to the concept. This does not, however, mean that what is *specific* to the name is exhausted by conceptual thought. Thought is continually referred back to the name, yet the name is never entirely conceptually

resolved or dissolved. The character of the name in this way remains immeasurable and excessive. Düttmann's essay can be considered as a meditation on Adorno's claim that Heidegger's philosophy, likened to a system of credit, *profits from its unpaid debts.* Thinking after *Auschwitz*, Adorno's philosophy thinks a *guilty debt.* Thinking of and in terms of *Germania*, Heidegger's philosophy thinks *inauguration.* The name inaugurates thought, but at the same time increases the guilty debt. In the essence of the name is entwined inauguration and guilt. The *memory of thought* is the interplay between the Sisyphan labour of thought – reflection on the burden of untruth and guilt incurred by thought in its necessary use of concepts – and the beginning – inauguration through language and the power of naming. In this interplay, a downfall bears all the features of a rise and a rise all the features of a downfall: rise and downfall hang in the balance.

Düttmann's analysis of how guilt and inauguration are entwined in thought and naming deftly negotiates a wide array of concepts and names – Benjamin's writing on fate, history, and the gift of language, Freud's analysis of the difference between Judaism and Christianity, discourse ethics in the work of Habermas and Apel, Hegel's writings on Judaism, Jaspers' remarks on the question of guilt, the figure of Dionysus in the work of Hölderlin and Nietzsche, and Kafka's fragments. His writing, somewhat akin to the way that Adorno characterises the movement of the non-identical by the concept of constellation, comes to resemble a series of interconnected configurations of a problematic, arranged in individually themed sections. The reader has a sense of frustration in attempting to identify, schematise and fix a thesis that is not laid out in advance or resolved so much as conceptually mapped, restlessly approached and successively re-modeled. The essay resembles a system of reciprocal indebtedness and irreconcilability, and the task of the reader is a retrospective reconstruction of the relation between concepts and terms that constitutes and structures a problematic. Düttmann gives voice to tensions, rather than anticipating answers by means of the question. The risk of this method is obfuscation, incoherence, or a lack of cohesion, but the author's writing demonstrates both an acute attentiveness to *minutiae* (faithful in method to Adorno's micrology of thinking) and a breadth of vision which, in not claiming to be summary, total or encompassing, is comprehensive and rigorous.

Düttmann's voice is not that of the interpreter and his task is not simply to convene a dialogue of texts. From an active transformation of the problematic or conceptual bloc the author successively re-models, the reader discovers that the emphasis placed on *process* in the essay is altogether creative. It is not the author's intention to inaugurate a new philosophy or a philosophy of inauguration – his writing resembles a series of warnings, rather than a settling of debts or expiation of what is indebted in thought. Nonetheless, there glimmers from hints made in the text what might be called a vertiginous conclusion, an unrest in which something *new*, something *disquieting* is glimpsed. In reference to Agamben's interpretation of Kafka's rewriting of the famous 'spinning top' story of the Stoics, Düttmann speaks of what it is the philosopher would like properly to grasp, namely, *speaking as such*:

> If [the philosopher] were ever to succeed in uttering the word of the word or in entering fully into the event of language, he would be free of the reeling revel into which we are whirled by language. He would be …
> rather like one who no longer needs to inaugurate anything. (272)

What is a thinking that is without the memory of thought, a thinking bereft of name and concept but not incurring guilt by isolating concept or name? One cannot name or conceive of such a thinking, yet it is a thinking or process to which all thought is ineluctably drawn: openness, language.

Walker is admirable in his ability consistently to represent the intricacies, subtleties and relentless interrogation characterising Düttmann's argument and method of analysis in prose which is clear, readable, and attentive to semantic nuances in the German philosophical lexicon. The translation is highly commendable and an essential contribution to the series of publications of Düttmann's books in English which it continues, opened by *At Odds with Aids: Thinking and Talking about a Virus* (1996), *Between Cultures: Tensions in the Struggle for Recognition* (2000) and *The Gift of Language: Memory and Promise in Adorno, Benjamin, Heidegger and Rosenzweig* (2000).