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# WHAT CAN PHILOSOPHY DO IN THE PRESENT?

*A Reading of Badiou and Žižek's  
"Philosophy in the Present"*

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**W**hat can philosophy do in the present? Can *she* intervene in the state of affairs, in political, social or philosophic situations? In a public conference held at Vienna in 2004, Žižek and Badiou contemplated on the idea of how philosophy mediates in the contemporary time and surprisingly both agree on what philosophy has to offer.

Badiou began the discourse with his speech on *Thinking the Event*. A philosopher, he alludes to, intervenes in the present as an inventor of new problems in a setting he called 'a philosophical situation.' He listed three forms of philosophical situation. First, it is a situation in need of a choice or decision, for instance, the relation between Socrates and Callicles, a relation premised on mere 'confrontation'. Philosophy herein arbitrates between two non-related viewpoints that are exactly different in both form and content. Second, a situation where there is a distance between power and truth. Here, Badiou cites a Roman Soldier beheading the intellectual Archimedes for not responding to his questions. The third philosophic situation implies a value of exception by means of an event of love. He describes a love story depicted in Mizoguchi's film *The Crucified Lovers*. A young woman married to a shop owner fell in love with their employee. They absconded to the woods and the husband makes excuses to his relatives to defend his wife's reputation. However, the law prevailed at the end and the condemned lovers were crucified leaving the audience with a 'smile.' The film, meanwhile, told us of the opposite perception: that love resists death (the film in literal sense gave us a view of dead lovers punished by the society). As Badiou says, "Between the event of love and the ordinary rules of life there is no common measure (...) what will philosophy tells us then? It will tell us that 'we must think the event' (...) we must think the exception (...)

we must think the transformation of life” (7). Love is being determined into an ‘undecidable’ event which values exception even in the rigid enforcement of laws in the society.

Badiou adds that if one desires to have a meaningful life through the guidance of philosophy one should think the event (exception), the distance between power and truth, and lastly, should be firm in all decisions.

Between Callicles and Socrates one should choose. On the other hand, if you take the side of Archimedes, you will be against the side of the Roman Soldier. Similarly, if you follow the lovers, then your action is adamantly hostile to the conjugal rule. As Plato would say, philosophy is an awakening. It is a seizure that would break the sleep of thought. And it would be legitimate to say that whenever there is paradox of any forms—then Philosophy takes place. This is the function of philosophy. Seizure implies a side to take, a selection that creates a break between choices, that is, the power of choice is the element of philosophy.

Badiou stressed that a philosopher must commit himself to a choice or decision in the name of universal principles. He demonstrated eight. First: *Thought is the proper medium of the universal*. By Thought, Badiou means the precondition of the possibility of being a subject at the local level before constituting a universal. Second: *Every universal is singular, or is a singularity*. The universal presents itself not as regularization of particular or of differences, but a subtraction from identitarian predicates, that is, in a form of singularity where the logic of the forms of knowledge describes particularity not in the lens of an “indescribable figure of universal itself.” Third: *Every universal originates in an event, and the event is intransitive to the particularity of the situation*. This *eventual revisionism* is explained by Badiou through negation of political universalism by declaring, say, that the French Revolution was a vain attempt and the May 1968 student movement was never a national emancipation but a sexual liberation. Fourth: *A universal presents itself as a decision*. Badiou emphasized the unfolding of the universal by drawing all consequences of eventual statements. There are events that are encyclopedic such that we understand these events only when predicated of knowledge that enjoins us to decide. Fifth: *The universal*

*has implicative form.* This implicative form verifies the consequences that follows from an evental statement, for instance, the *undecidability* of the French Revolution whether it is successful or not in its objectives to which the missing event is indexed. This event remains in the political category (that of political universality) even if one thinks that there is no revolution. Sixth: Badiou explains that: *The universal is univocal.* Every statement in a given situation is undecidable. One has to conform to a choice as logical necessity, either affirming or denying the situation. But what occurs in the event has nothing to do with the meaning or the beings of the event; whereas any previous events that are undecidable will have to be decided in favor of truth. But if there is an event seemingly “devoid of any significance,” it would have to yield to exceptions on decision. Consequently, it is clear that what affects the evental statements is the “act” whose nature is univocal. Seventh: *Every universal singularity remains incompletable or open.* Badiou’s commentary here is about the *subject-thought* whose localization is bound to infinitude, that is, “the ontological view of being-multiple” which cognizes the possibility of conforming to infinite affirmations that uncloses the universal singularity. Eight: Badiou’s last thesis on the universal: *Universality is nothing other than the faithful construction of an infinite generic multiple.* Generic multiplicity expounds the non-determination of any predicates of encyclopedic knowledge whose membership requires non-identity, or non-possession of any properties that mark the differences in the group in a given situation. Universality arises in the faithful construction of such generic multiple that leaves the subject-thought open. It would culminate in the invention of consequences that will initiate multiple possibilities.

For his part, Žižek contends that philosophy is not a discourse of everybody longing for home. Philosophers are called to intervene; however, his task has something to do with changing the concept of the present situation. Philosophers, more often take the side of an alternative in solving a problem. This gesture however complements the most typical characteristics of philosophy, being a non-dialogic discipline. Žižek mentioned that political agreements among philosophers (like Derrida and Habermas along with other American philosophers on the summer of 2003 calling for a New Europe) betray something on their own philosophy.

Philosophers often give ‘fast food philosophical answers’ which Žižek characterizes as “a philosophical confusion, a type of politico-ontological short circuit” (32). This enables us to think that philosophy nowadays (Žižek refers to Postmodernism) performs the act of pseudo-transcendental category which evokes “immediate ontological unveiling” (33). In this light, Žižek stressed the anomalous place of Neo-Kantianism through its representative, Habermas. For Žižek, Habermas’s ‘state philosophy’ enunciates this form of thinking which provokes a somewhat totalitarian position of science in the society. He defined state philosophy in the Habermasian sense as the “endorser of development necessary for capitalism, science and *etcetera*” (34). On the contrary, Žižek proposed a new definition of “state philosophy” as a “philosophy which tacitly tolerates scientific and technical progress, while on the other hand, it tries to control its effects on our socio-symbolic order, that is, to prevent the existing theological-ethical world picture from changing” (35).

What is then the role of philosophy?

Philosophy, Žižek answered, “hardly plays a normal role in the sense that it is merely a philosophy.” It habitually lodges in the position of other fields or subjects. By stating an example, he mentioned that German Philosophy was brought by the non-appearance of revolution by that time. Thus, we should be awakened from our dream of having a normal philosophy because it is anomalous *par excellence*! Žižek adds that philosophy “literally exists with its excessive connection to external condition which is of amorous, political or *etcetera*” (49).

Following Kant’s notion of “public and private use of reason” Žižek gave emphasis on intellectuals engaging in public philosophical debates. Like Badiou, he buoyed the participation of singularity in universal by means of overcoming humanism (universality) through disposing the singular non-human (inhuman). ‘Inhuman’ is a terrifying excess that resists symbolization and should be evaded. Žižek offered an astonishing proposal: a redefinition of ‘inhuman/non-human’ via humanization or the universal idea of being human. One can be human without a race difference: German, French, and English, for example. The fundamental message of philosophy, according to Žižek, is the immediate participation in the universality, beyond particular

identifications (40). This would sufficiently support the premise that even Žižek, in this book, would conform to a need for timely philosophy that is, in nature, emancipatory.

Badiou and Žižek both agree that philosophers themselves *should* intervene in the process of paradoxical thinking, the idea that contradictions occur in light of choice, power and exception.

Echoing Nietzsche, both agree that, “a Philosopher should be a kind of a physician that diagnoses evil, suffering and, if need be, suggest remedies in order to return to the normal state of affairs” (46).

## R E F E R E N C E

Badiou, Alain and Slavoj Žižek. *Philosophy in the Present*. Translated by Peter Thomas and Alberto Toscano. USA: Polity Press, 2009.





# THE BELOVED IDIOM

*A Reading of Villafania's Pinabli & Other Poems*

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In his memoir *Elegy for Iris*, John Bayley revealed that the young Murdoch wanted her first novel to have “something for everybody.” This was, at least for Bayley, akin to the very spirit of Shakespeare’s corpus. Likewise, I find this phrase the best way to describe Santiago Villafania’s latest book. For in terms of language, advocacy, and aesthetic vision, *Pinabli & other poems*, indeed has something in hand for everybody.

“Pinabli” is the Pangasinan word for beloved, perhaps a single beloved, but the reader will find that the direction of this passion disperses. This book extends itself, encompassing the country, the waxing and waning of its literature, blessing the Pangasinan language, embracing languages in their plurality and mutability (for – as a proper banquet – this book is generously attended by the translations of distinguished well-wishers into Filipino, Ilocano, English, Spanish, and Italian), drawing inspiration from Jose Rizal, Sappho, and Cirilo Bautista, and singing of many personages, among them Jaime P. Lucas and Levi Celerio, a soulmate too, and an unnamed rebel poet.

However, in the same way that so many varied adventures lead to the fulfillment of a single quest, all these loves seem to pour into one overarching *pinabli: Caboloan*, that is, the ancient name of Pangasinan. To oversee this scheme, the poet chose the magnificent Urduja to recur as a figurehead, the heroine and muse.

In her introduction, Dr. Florangel Rosario Braid quoted Dr. Ricardo Nolasco’s remark that Villafania has produced models for succeeding writers. I followed this lead and found, happily, how judiciously Villafania orchestrated the commingling of many poetic forms with the different languages, for example, how a Pangasinan tongue-twister assumed the form of a sonnet, how the *anlong* caught

Jose Garcia Villa and Leonard Cohen unawares, how the haiku – in a pas de deux with Pangasinan – yielded to the cummings-type lyric that sought to cut in.

I can imagine how a reader can find fault in the scatter of these mass of poems. In my view, what the collection lost in terms of cohesion and elegance, it gains in sweep and ambition. Villafania needs such vision and range to translate poetic forms across the shores of cultures. He must willingly import and export these forms and languages, wholesale, so to speak, in order to assure the continuity of Pangasinan literature. If he wishes to increase the repertoire of this particular literature, he must endow it with new methods of drawing breath.

The present collection proves Villafania equal to the challenge he set for himself.

Something in this book for everybody, I said, but what's in it for me? There is this one poem, and I had the good fortune of hearing the poet read it himself, his delivery almost as sombre as his black shirt. *Dalityapi sa Huling Paglalakbay* speaks of the final journey of the cattle-caravans (those lovely cow-drawn shops laden with brooms, clay pots, toys, and many other products from the provinces) toward the city that decided to shun them. Villafania leads with this stanza:

*ang mga bumabaroy ng Caboloan  
ilang salinlahi din silang naghari  
sa mga daan at lansangan upang sundan  
ang bakas ng kanilang mga ninuno  
at haraya ng lalawigang pinagmulan*

Here is the penultimate stanza of the second movement:

*sa ngalan ng paglago at pagbabago  
ngayon ay mga dumi sila sa paningin  
sa mga lansangang ipinagbabawal nang apakan  
sa mga bayang pilit iniluluwa  
ang kanilang kaluluwa pabalik sa silangan*

# PRUDENTE AS REVOLUTIONIST AND PROPHET

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In his essay “Literature of Knowledge and Literature of Power,” Thomas de Quincey did not anticipate the rise of revolutionary literature as instrument for radical change.

Dr. Nemesio E. Prudente’s “The Revolutionists” is a novel of ideas based on his life as a political detainee for six years and as a refugee in the heart of rural Philippines opposed to Marcos’ martial rule. It tells about the adventures of his alter ego and the novel’s protagonist, Dr. Dencio “Ka Edong” Noble, who immersed himself in the ever growing revolutionary clamor in the countryside as poverty intensified, as politics became more and more authoritarian, and as people of mixed ideologies, particularly the youth and studentry, transformed themselves into self-taught armed cadres and partisans inspired by grassroots wisdom, simplicity and honesty.

It tells about *Ka Edong* holding court with the college dropouts, activists and unlettered farmers while on the run from the military. This sets the novel apart from the other Filipino works, which are mostly picaresque or novels of manners, with the possible exception of Rizal and Amado V. Hernandez. Here we note a marked difference: Prudente’s novel does not only explicate on the human condition, it stirs men to action.

In the last chapter of Rizal’s *Fili*, we see Father Florentino and the dying Simoun discussing good and evil. In chapter five of Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov* we see Ivan Karamazov in his delirium indicting Christ again for coming back and not putting an end

to human suffering. With Dostoevsky again, in the last chapter, we see Father Alyosha Karamazov, like Father Florentino, talking of the eternal human condition.

Prudente does not moralize. In stirring men to action, he also takes a glimpse of the future. In fact, many of the events taking place today have been predicted by him in his own introduction to the book, as well as in its epilogue, such as the downfall of Erap Estrada and Marcos before him, the highs and lows in the Cory Aquino and Fidel Ramos administrations, the military role in the ousting of two presidents, the continuing CPP-NPA threat, the significance of EDSA 1 and 2, and the stirring call to arms at the end of the book: “Stay awake Filipino nationalists, progressives and democrats! Our job is far from done!”

The rise in terrorism has been predicted by Prudente but he warns against confusing terrorism with revolution. Asks student leader Vicky in chapter five: “In a revolutionary struggle, in particular armed struggle, where is the dividing line between terrorism and revolution?”

State terrorism, *Ka Edong* answers, is institutional violence, extreme poverty and misery, and assumes varied forms like a court order upholding a land-grabber and setting him free. Is fighting for justice an act of terrorism?

In the same chapter five of the novel, which is practically a book within a book in terms of ideas, Prudente goes farther than Arthur Koestler’s *Darkness at Noon* and Albert Camus’s *The Delicate Murderers*. He asks: “How would the selective assassination of the enemies of the people range against the revolutionary’s principles of morality, decency and respect for human life.

He adds: “If the communist parties and their controlled governments are anti-people instead of pro-people, then I believe that one of these days they’d be confronted with people’s revolutions.”

What is the solution?

The student leader Vicky again says: “*Ka Edong* is for the establishment of a people’s democracy in the country, in contrast to the elitist democracy which existed before martial law. Yet, he admits that even the elitist democracy is preferable to a fascist dictatorship. He stresses, nevertheless, that going back to the elitist type of democracy should be avoided. For him, a people’s democracy must rise from the ruins of the dismantled dictatorship. Returning to the pre-martial law elitist democracy would merely restore the old problems, not very different from the problems we’re now facing.”

Well said.