

Badiou and the Ethics of Prose: Revaluing Beckett

Claire Joubert
Polart – Université Paris 8
30/07/04

We can begin from the singularity of Alain Badiou's contention in the current theoretical debates, and his pamphleteering radicality: his critique of contemporary nihilism, philosophical but also more generally cultural, and his critique of the morals associated with identity politics. From the startling effect this is having on Anglo-Saxon theory in particular – insofar as much of it is based on those twin supports: the deconstructionist lineage of Continental phenomenology, and the native development of cultural studies. For there is much to be gained from what his forceful readings identify as the points of conceptual concretion in these discourses, the complacencies of *doxa* where the poststructuralist and postmodernist incisiveness has turned to, in his own words, “non-thought”. There is a tonic in the critical insights that they produce about the relativist abdication of philosophy, as he sees it, and its compensatory reliance on aestheticized fetishes. My aim is therefore to see which questions his intervention raises, and which he further enables us to raise.

Of particular interest to me is what he makes of the question of art – and the question of the poem, specifically –, which he marks out as the stress point in the post-humanist attempts at extricating the ties between truth and value. As the focus onto which converges all the aporetic tension accumulated in the attempts to conceive a non-essentialist ethics – that is, to contemplate the historicity of value. His diagnosis of the instrumentalization of art in the “pathos”¹ of truthlessness is a salutary jolt in the routines of literary theory as well as in philosophy, as is his indictment of the fetishization of literature by “Blanchot, Derrida, and Deleuze for that matter”²

¹ Alain Badiou, *Manifeste pour la philosophie* (Paris: Seuil, 1989), p. 33.

² “en France, le fétichisme de la littérature (Blanchot, Derrida, Deleuze aussi bien...) [...] délègue le vif de la pensée à la condition artistique” (*Manifeste pour la philosophie, op. cit.*,

– for if philosophy loses its epistemological specificity in what Badiou calls the *suture* to the Heideggerian cult of the Poem, there is also the symmetrical loss for poetics to consider: its subordination to an aesthetics which burdens the artistic down with the compensatory responsibility for ultimate value.

The question is: can Badiou's efforts to recover the Platonic purity of philosophical force by proseifying the poetic actually undo the confusion which tends to suture together the artistic and the absolute, because it has, on the other side of the conceptual mirror, made immanence and the arbitrariness of truthlessness – identified with the formula of the arbitrariness of the sign – indistinguishable?

Certainly, what Badiou does with literature points directly to the recognition of art's power to interrogate the theories of truth, and of the demise of truth, with the question of value. To art's ethical criticality, and creativity, to be precise. What he does specifically with Beckett is interesting: he creates a site for himself where he can rethink the articulation of ethics and art by unpicking the usual Sartre and Blanchot-inspired association of Beckett with the motifs of literary and moral exhaustion. By squaring himself against the aesthetics of negativity which Beckett is a major pre-text for, he finds an opportunity to work at his own "doctrine of truth" with the support of an ethics of prose. Beckett makes possible his project of an "inaesthetics"³, beyond Mallarmé and Rimbaud and the other key authors from the "Age of poets" which make up his literary corpus. Through the revaluation of Beckett, he can plan the renegotiation of the tie between "prose and concept"⁴ which will free philosophy from its subjection to the exclusive "condition" of the Poem: a renewal of the live collaboration and mutual specification of philosophy and art, in the shared exercise of the affirmative production of truths.

My aim here is to measure the productivity, indeed both for philosophy and for poetics, of Badiou's "true encounter"⁵ with Beckett, which he offers us as an opening out of the semiotic morals of arbitrariness and its dilution of the subject.

To be quite clear from the start, the point of discussion for me is what Badiou actually proposes as the alternative to the ethical deadlock of poststructuralist thought, especially in the context of the current "ethical turn"⁶. The issue boils down, it seems, to the question of what we make now of the Saussurian legacy, and, crucially, of which understanding of the arbitrariness of the sign we choose to build on from. Badiou's critique of negativity and the cult of the Poem as "reactionary nostalgia"⁷ for pre-

p. 47). All the extracts from Badiou's work currently unavailable in English have been translated by myself.

³ Alain Badiou, *Petit Manuel d'inesthétique* (Paris: Seuil, 1998), p. 7.

⁴ "Etre, existence, pensée: prose et concept", *Petit Manuel d'inesthétique*, op. cit., pp. 137-187.

⁵ Alain Badiou, *Beckett, L'incroyable désir* (Paris: Hachette, 1995), p. 5.

⁶ See for instance Marjorie Garber, Beatrice Hanssen & Rebecca L. Walkowitz eds., *The Turn to Ethics* (London: Routledge, 2000).

⁷ *Petit Manuel d'inesthétique*, op. cit., p. 47.

Nietzschean absolute Truth indeed shows up *one* conception of the arbitrary; as the *absence* of foundational legitimacy and the consequent obliteration of ethics – the theories of language as exile from truth and “prison-house” for the subject. The question is to see whether his campaign to recover the possibilities of truth and subjectivity manages to break the hold of the semiotic dualism between presence and absence – between the alternatives of transcendence: absolute authority, or absolute relativism. It is Badiou’s contribution to the current renegotiation of the linguistic turn, as epistemological paradigm of the 20th century, which gives his propositions their topical feel. But the question has to be therefore: can he actually take the poststructuralist aporia on ethics out of its moralizing pathos and wrest thinking clean away from the nostalgic morals of the sign, based as it is still on a reduction of Saussure’s concept of the signifier to the ancient linguistics of the name? For this reduction is the denial of the historicity of semantic value, which organizes the arbitrary counters of *langue* into the specific processes of *discours*, thereby making language the very process of subjectivation, and ethical creation.

To this question, my own conclusion is an unambiguous no. His “Platonism of the multiple”⁸ claims to find a solution in a theory of truth able to account for being *qua* being, and yet non-essential, and “de-totalized”⁹. A truth whose immanence would be justified in the particularity of the situation – Badiou claims to be a materialist, in this sense¹⁰ – and the historicity of the truth-event. Yet it is clear that his concept of the generic is a wholehearted radicalization of identity – which he subtracts altogether from all the socializing and semantic organizations which make up the historical texture of value: Badiou’s “particular” means the ontological purity of singularity, and the event is precisely the process by which the situation is de-historicized into truth, “immortal”¹¹ and absolute, demanding the total adhesion of a fidelity. So that in his “ethics of truths”, the plural, which is meant to de-totalize, only makes totalization the omnipresent operation in the re-founding of philosophy. It is a process of atomization of systems into discrete elements, each to its own totality¹², which voids all units of meaning and particularity in order to establish the rule of pure numericity¹³: “the empty power of the letter”¹⁴. And if the theory of the truth-event tries to defend the concept of the subject against the “death of man”, if it claims to offer a theory

⁸ *Manifeste pour la philosophie, op. cit.*, p. 85.

⁹ Alain Badiou, *Conditions* (Paris: Seuil, 1992), p. 341.

¹⁰ Alain Badiou, “Politics and Philosophy: An Interview with Alain Badiou”, in *Ethics. An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* (London: Verso, 2001), pp. 95-144, p. 130.

¹¹ Alain Badiou, *Ethics. An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* (London: Verso, 2001), p. 12.

¹² Society, for instance, is conceived as a set of isolated singletons, “a communism of singularities” (*Manifeste pour la philosophie, op. cit.*, p. 92).

¹³ *Conditions, op. cit.*, p. 358.

¹⁴ *Manifeste pour la philosophie, op. cit.*, p. 91.

of subjectivation, which refuses the “stodgy conservatism” of the current “ethical ideology”¹⁵ and recaptures the movement of desire, yet its ethics of fidelity constructs a view of the subject as *quelconque*: “pure quantity”¹⁶, characterless and de-subjectivized. The “sujet du mathème”. But when value is no longer what is *of count* but what is *counted*, when ethics is replaced by “the arcana of quantity”¹⁷ – counting and its exception, the supplement, the supernumerary, when truth adds a new number –, then we are left with the pure formality of the imperative: the authority of the law in its mathematical arbitrariness.

This voiding of value results from the avowedly “Platonic gesture”¹⁸ which rids the philosophical horizon of the relativism of meaning by turning back to the authority of the Name, and short-circuiting language. The terms are clear: this is a theory of truth, and not of signification. Truth, to Badiou, is what “delivers no meaning”¹⁹ but brings forth a new signifier, as it punctures the plane of knowledges and shines out in its own extra-linguistic revelation. The ethics that a such theory of truth generates might hang on the Lacanian axiom of “not giving up on one’s desire”, but the fidelity it militates for remains a curious reworking of Lacan’s psychoanalytical ethics: it takes the imperative out of the context of the “talking cure” and the *parlêtre*, and alienates it from what makes the core of Freudian anthropology: the linguistic nature of the subject and of the law. The recurrent vindication of Plato’s exclusion of the Poet from the Republic, on the grounds that it is in itself the recognition of the poetic as a condition for philosophy,²⁰ amounts again to the same gesture: it is a protection against language and, through that, against the historicity of semantic and ethical value. This indeed has every chance of making a space for a philosophical activity which will be free from all possibility of nihilism. But from this devil, it falls back into the deep blue sea of the absolute. And develops into an epistemology of certainties; a “modern doctrine of the subject”²¹, and a “doctrine of the event”²². Badiou is right, it is “a matter of the ethics of thought”²³: the philosophical practice here is a militant dogmatics, which advertizes its Platonic authority.

¹⁵ *Ethics*, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

¹⁶ *Manifeste pour la philosophie*, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

¹⁷ Alain Badiou, *L’Être et l’événement* (Paris: Seuil, 1988), p. 187.

¹⁸ *Manifeste pour la philosophie*, *op. cit.*, pp. 79-84.

¹⁹ *L’Être et l’événement*, *op. cit.*, p. 429.

²⁰ Poetry will be possible on the condition that the poem be repressed: “je pense que la poésie, et singulièrement le poème tragique sont absolument une condition de la philosophie de Platon, même si une part de l’effet de cette condition est de bannissement, d’exclusion, de polémique; d’ailleurs il en parle constamment, considère que c’est une question de la plus haute importance” (“La Poésie en condition de la philosophie. Entretien avec Alain Badiou”, *Europe*, 849-850 (2000), pp. 65-75, p.74).

²¹ *L’Être et l’événement*, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

²² “La poésie en condition de la philosophie”, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

²³ *Ibid*, p. 74.

We can only accept such a self-conscious gesture. And yet still locate the issues on which the doctrinal epistemology will find its fault lines: the question of ethics – because it can only accommodate an unhistorical conception of value and therefore only produce dogmatic morals –, and the question of the poetic – because the critical force of the poem has a tendency to sabotage the strategies of totality.

This is why Badiou's "encounter" with Beckett is particularly relevant: it doesn't tell us only what Badiou does with the poetic when he works on his concept of prose to undo the suture to the Poem; it also tells us what the poetic does to his thinking, how it creates problems in it, and reintroduces the movement of criticality in a corpus of truths. How it leads Badiou into the historicity of his own thinking – which he is regularly ready to acknowledge himself, it has to be noted²⁴. My purpose is just to indicate a few of these problematic points, not in order to build a case against Badiou but to show the criticality of the poetic at work – even inside a philosophy of the name. As an illustration of the power that the question of the poem has as the rub in the human sciences.

There are three main texts about Beckett, all testifying to the strategic importance of his work for Badiou's thinking – in chronological order: the concluding section of *Conditions* (1992), where Beckett's writing comes to flesh out the concept of the generic and give the volume of essays a kind of mythical conclusion, the monographic study entitled *Beckett, L'incroyable désir* (1995 – Badiou doesn't often single out an author to write about. The others are Saint-Paul and Deleuze), and a chapter in *Petit Manuel d'inesthétique* (1998), where the late prose text *Worstward Ho* is invoked in support of the critique of the Heideggerian Poem. The three texts build Beckett's fiction into one fable of the generic: they are made to exemplify the drama of the truth procedure in the order of art. Against the prevalent readings of Beckett which perpetuate the "false and oppressive thesis that 'nothing is, nothing is of value' [rien n'est, rien ne vaut]"²⁵; which picture Beckett as "convinced that outside of the obstinacy of words, there is only blackness and emptiness"²⁶, Badiou wants present "this other Beckett, which

²⁴ See for instance the correction of the earlier position taken in *Théorie du sujet* in the introduction of *L'Être et l'événement*, the correction of several key propositions of *Ethics* in the preface to the English edition, or the comments about his own suture to the political in *Manifeste pour la philosophie*: "Toute suture est une exagération. [... Heidegger] n'a pas fait mieux au regard du poème que ceux – j'en fus – qui absolutisèrent philosophiquement la politique de l'intérieur de la suture marxiste, bien au-delà de ce que la politique réelle était en état d'annoncer sur elle-même." (*Manifeste pour la philosophie, op. cit.*, p. 57)

²⁵ *Beckett, L'incroyable désir, op. cit.*, p. 5.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

is a Beckett of the gift and of the happiness of being”²⁷: a work which affirms the perseverance of desire, the possibility of value, and the freedom from “the torture of sense”²⁸. Two main propositions organize the demonstration: one is that “the ascetic movement of [Beckett’s] prose”²⁹, his “prosodic bareness”³⁰ enables him to “apprehend the essence of generic humanity”³¹. His prose is artistic in that it brings existence down to its “essential determinations”: paring description down to a minimum, bringing characterization down to a typology of generic figures, reducing action to the three “essential functions” of “going, being, and saying”³² and later adding one more: the Other: “presenting in fiction the timeless determinants of humanity”³³ – the Platonic *genera*. “Beckett’s writing is beautiful [because it] asks nothing of prose [...] but to hold itself as close as possible to that which, ultimately, makes up all existence: the empty stage of being... and the events which suddenly populate it”³⁴. Beckett’s prose is this “purified axiomatics”³⁵, this configuration of “aphorisms” and “maxims”³⁶ which affirms the absolute value of essence and ultimately the stolidity of generic humanity.

The second proposition discovers another dimension to the drama of genericity, in the evolution of Beckett’s output: a first period would have led him to the impasse of solipsism and the “torture of sense” up until *How It Is*, published in 1960, and then the period when the late prose opens onto the historicity of the event and the alterity of the Two (“le Deux”), and through that, the regime of the “miracle, which contains all of Beckett’s paradoxical optimism”³⁷. The miracle of love, and beauty; and the undoubtedness of values, effectuated through nomination: Beckett’s poetics of the “ill said” is interpreted here as the process of naming the event that has pierced through to the essence of speech beyond speech: the “ill said as essence of the said” declares that “being inexists from language”³⁸, and is thereby able to name this Presence of being in the negative of language: “one can call ‘Presence’ being as it inexists from language [...]. We will state that this Presence is neither an illusion, which would be the sceptical thesis, nor a true and utterable comprehension, which would be the dogmatic thesis, but a certainty without concept. [...] there cannot be [any clear and distinct idea of presence]

²⁷ *Conditions, op. cit.*, p. 359.

²⁸ *Beckett, L'incroyable désir, op. cit.* p. 46.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

³⁰ *Conditions, op. cit.*, p. 332.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 331.

³² *Beckett, L'incroyable désir, op. cit.*, p. 22.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 77-78.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 6 and 9.

³⁷ *Conditions, op. cit.*, p. 354.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 336.

because that which is left of it to us is a pure proper noun, *void*, or *nothing*.”³⁹
 What Badiou comes to call “a poetic name, a name without a signification”⁴⁰.

It is easy enough for anyone with a culture in literary theory to recognize here the ordinary critical tropes of hermeneutics, which have been one traditional philosophical mode of accounting for the literary – including that of Heideggerian poetics –, and to point to the usual problem with the equation of writing with fiction, and of art with representation. Here the problem takes the form of the indistinction between the effectuation of the truth-event in the prose, and the allegorical representation of the truth-event: when Badiou sets up his demonstration of Beckett’s work as “operation of truth”, the shift has already been made from one to the other: “For Beckett, who is an artist, th[e] operator is an arrangement of fictions [un dispositif de fictions]”⁴¹. But as soon as *prose* starts to mean *fiction*⁴², we lose the question of art, language becomes transparent and is soon blotted out; and from “événementiel” as “evental” (according to the translation suggested by Peter Hallward), we shift to what French narratology also calls “événementiel”, to mean the diegetic content. It is curious, for instance, to realise when we come to the end of Badiou’s theoretical tale of the truth procedure in Beckett, that we are no longer holding on to an event in the order of *art*: the miracle which has happened is one that now belongs to the truth regime of *love*. The “event of the meeting”⁴³ with alterity has indeed taken place, but it is the meeting between characters, as generic figures of the feminine and the masculine. It is, indeed, “the characters” who “realize the fiction of generic writing” here.⁴⁴ And when Badiou takes one of Beckett’s words to name the affirmation produced in this event – “bonheur” –, the shift is explicit: “there is happiness only in love, it is the reward particular to this type of truth. In art there is pleasure, in science joy, and in politics enthusiasm, but in love there is happiness”⁴⁵. This literalization of *récit* as *histoire* casts the shadow of a

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 337-338.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 351.

⁴¹ *Conditions*, op. cit., p. 333.

⁴² In the same way, in Badiou’s reading, the issue of theatricality, which is raised as a matter of the poetics of prose, is reduced to *dialogue*, as verbal exchange between characters – as diegetic event, not as the text’s enunciative mode: “Là est peut-être la singularité du théâtre de Beckett. Il n’y a théâtre qu’autant qu’il y a dialogue, discord et discussion entre deux personnages, et la méthode ascétique de Beckett restreint la théâtralité aux effets possibles du Deux.” (*Beckett, L’incroyable désir*, op. cit., p. 73).

⁴³ *Conditions*, op. cit., p. 363.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 331. In the same way, the idea of the prose event – “that-which-is-happening”, the “incalculable advent” (*Conditions* (Paris: Seuil, 1992), p. 347) – is always illustrated by examples of events that actually belong to the plane of the diegetic: the event of Godot’s coming, or the conceptual drama of the nymphs’ vanishing in Mallarmé’s “L’Après-midi d’un faune”, studied in great detail in “Philosophie du faune”, a chapter in *Petit Manuel d’Inesthétique*, op. cit., pp. 189-215). It might be argued that these are put forward as allegories of textual events. Yet Badiou does not present them as such, but as the artistic event itself.

⁴⁵ *Conditions*, op. cit., p. 363.

serious doubt on the truth-event as exception from the linguistic situation: this encounter needs no “incalculable poem [for] its nomination”⁴⁶: it has fallen into the ordinary realm of narrative telling, and its ordinary agonizing over fiction and truth. The same can be said about the incidents which break the uneventfulness of Watt’s life in the house of Mr Knott: Badiou talks of “the eventual brilliance, the pure and delectable ‘appearing’ [‘surgir’] of the incidents in question”⁴⁷: nonetheless they are still events in the story and not events in the writing. It doesn’t take the specificity of Beckett’s prose to represent the generic event – Badiou’s prose does just as well.

This puts a different complexion of the issue of an ethics of prose, and the attempt it constitutes of rethinking the articulation of art and thought outside of the nihilist pathos of the Poem. This issue is certainly one of the most interesting points of Badiou’s work on Beckett, and in both the article in *Conditions* and the book on Beckett, it functions as pivotal moment in the argument. For what is at stake in it is the theory of *value*, which will determine the demarcation between ethics and morals. Between value and the representation of – the fetishization of – value.

Badiou starts with a very perceptive reading gesture, which indeed works against the absurdist interpretations of Beckett: he notes that, in *How It Is*, the terms “victim” and “torturer” [“bourreau”] must not be confused with the moralistic meanings that they can have outside the semantic context of the work: “No pathos, no ethics is implied here. Except that of prose”⁴⁸. Beckett takes care to let us feel the ironical exaggeration in “these [otherwise] conventional denominations”⁴⁹, and their semantic value is clearly specific to the text’s poetics; their reference is intra-systemic. They create a specific conception of “justice” therefore, in which the Beckettian ethics is at work, in the prosaic invention of value. But the point at which Badiou loses this hold on a poetics of value is when he moves on to interpret the two terms as “female” and “male”, which leads him then to build his final scenario of the love encounter and the affirmation of happiness as ultimate value. He remarks himself that “[t]he words ‘man’ and ‘woman’ are not uttered by Beckett, precisely because they refer too easily to a permanent, structural Two”⁵⁰. But by drawing away from the actual terms of Beckett’s prose, he himself breaks out of the semantic context and reintegrates the realm of the hermeneutic de-specification of value. He goes back to building his interpretation of narrative motifs, and ends up offering Beckett’s text as the direct statement of a generic truth about mathematical justice – a maxim “of great depth”: “En tous cas on est dans la justice je n’ai jamais entendu dire le contraire”. “[T]he justice mentioned here doesn’t refer to any norm,”

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Beckett, *L’incroyable désir*, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

⁴⁹ *Conditions*, *op. cit.*, p. 355.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 356.

Badiou writes, “to any finality. It concerns the ontological equality of the figures of the generic human subject”⁵¹; the maxim denies all semiotic reference, including that of the poetic system, and emerges, beyond the specificity of value, straight onto the plane of genericity; of transcendent valuelessness.

In the end, Badiou’s critical reevaluation of Beckett, and his rethinking of ethics through the poetics of prose, turns out to be the process where the ethical pathos of nihilism is simply reversed in an equally pathetic repositivation of value⁵², and a return to the staples of moralistic tradition, organized around the core virtue of fidelity. The attempt to take Beckett’s work “literally at last” [“prendre enfin Beckett au pied de sa lettre”] ends up celebrating “Beckett’s lesson in moderation [mesure], in exactitude, and in courage”⁵³. With Beckett are now associated hope and happiness, courage and justice, truth, love – and beauty. For, classically, morals will rely on the aestheticization of art, as the value beyond values, to legitimate all values. It is no coincidence that both texts conclude on Beckett’s “slow and sudden execution of the Beautiful”⁵⁴. *Prose* had shifted over to mean *fiction*, in support of mimetic hermeneutics and the morals of narrative. Now, under the effect of love, it is transfigured into the beauty of poetry: “The Two of love establishes the sensible version [of Beckett’s axioms]. Love delivers beauty, nuance, colour. [...] And this is why one finds in Beckett’s prose these sudden poems [...] these latent poems of the prose”⁵⁵. The equation of poetry with the Beautiful as both sensible presence and language beyond language is a clear return to the tradition of aesthetics, with its explicit Kantian reference⁵⁶. It is also an acknowledgement that the concept of prose has done little to overturn the Heideggerian orthodoxy, if it is defined as the “poetization of language”⁵⁷, and the event-advent of the Beautiful – as what silences all philosophical speech, and freezes the movement of thought in the celebration of this fetish of the absolute. The end of the article in *Conditions* ends in such dumbfounded awe: the thinking stops in order to let the beauty of Beckett’s truth-statements speak themselves. Long passages are quoted, all the while exhibiting the critical abdication of the philosopher: for “the text speaks for itself, basically” [“le texte, au fond, parle de lui-même”], Badiou writes⁵⁸. The extracts are simply presented with such indications as “this

⁵¹ Beckett, *L’incroyable désir*, op. cit., p. 53.

⁵² See for instance: “Et puisque c’est en lisant *L’Innommable* qu’est née ma passion de quarante ans pour cet auteur, plutôt que les sentences sur le langage qui ont enchanté ma jeunesse, j’aimerais en retenir cet aphorisme qui encore aujourd’hui me bouleverse, quand le parleur innommable, à travers ses larmes, certain de ne jamais renoncer, déclare: *Moi seul suis homme et tout le reste divin*”. (Beckett, *L’incroyable désir*, op. cit., p. 9)

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

⁵⁵ *Conditions*, op. cit., p. 359.

⁵⁶ Beckett, *L’incroyable désir*, op. cit., p. 80.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

⁵⁸ *Conditions*, op. cit., p. 351.

other, very beautiful text”⁵⁹: “What is there to do but to listen to what *is happening*? Here is the beginning [of *Ill Seen Ill Said*], one of the most beautiful texts in our language, in my opinion”⁶⁰. In Beckett’s prose as generic “no man’s land”⁶¹, the question of an ethics of prose gets its simple answer: it is swallowed up in the silent authority of the absolute. Art essentialized is taken outside of signification, and the expulsion of the poetic is replayed.

It is a problem of the historical, and of theories of the historical. In Badiou’s inaesthetics, the idea is to restrain the linguistic practice of aesthetics, as “domestication” and “pacification”⁶² of artistic events; and to submit to the extra-linguistic revelation of art’s direct truths as the “awakening of thought”⁶³, in order then to find the fidelity that will enable the radical renewal of philosophical discourse. The truth, as “certainty without concept” comes *first*, timeless and immortal, in its anti-historical newness; meaning and value are worked out, literally, *after the event*, in the course of what Badiou calls “enquête”, or “subject-language”⁶⁴. Art is therefore invoked as a model for the post-evental conception of value. But, as Andrew Gibson has noted in his own article on Beckett and Badiou⁶⁵, the encounter with Beckett’s poetics leads Badiou into a peculiar contradiction about the historical sequence of the truth procedure:

Badiou appears to reverse [...] the structure of the progress of a truth – in what he has to say of Beckett. For Beckettian fidelity appears to be rather to the *possibility* of the event than to any specifiable event in itself. The very concept of fidelity seems less relevant, here, than that of courage. [...] In “Art and Philosophy”, Badiou describes a work or works of art as constructing a particular truth in a “dimension postévénementielle” (AP, p. 25). [...] But the Beckettian series rather moves laboriously *towards* the event, adumbrates it. [...]

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 360.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 365.

⁶¹ Beckett, *L’incroyable désir*, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

⁶² “il m’a toujours semblé que l’esthétique comme science du beau, comme science séparée du beau, et comme branche de la philosophie, consiste toujours à dire: ‘ce que à travers le beau je peux désigner comme vrai est ce que la philosophie va dire à propos du beau ou à l’occasion du beau’. L’esthétique saisit donc la disposition artistique dans une sorte d’alignement à autre chose qu’elle-même qui finalement est l’espace philosophique comme tel: il y a alors une sorte de domestication, de pacification, de ce qui est en jeu dans l’art par cette esthétique philosophique. C’est pourquoi je préfère parler d’‘inesthétique’ plutôt que d’esthétique” (“La Poésie en condition de la philosophie”, *op. cit.*, pp. 66-67).

⁶³ Beckett, *L’incroyable désir*, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

⁶⁴ *L’Etre et l’événement*, *op. cit.*, p. 438.

⁶⁵ Andrew Gibson, “Beckett and Badiou”, in Richard Lane ed., *Beckett and Philosophy* (London: Palgrave, 2002), pp. 93-107.

The extraordinary implication of Badiou's work on Beckett is that Beckett's art is neither a representation, nor an expression, nor an indication of a truth. It is rather a disposition, a way of waiting for a truth, of clearing the ground for it". [...] By implication, the process in question is also an ethico-political practice.⁶⁶

Indeed, because Beckett's poetics challenges the anti-historical and representational view of the ethics of prose, it moves Badiou to actually envisage something that comes close to a rehistoricized event, developing within the time of sense-making and ethical activity. Certainly, as Gibson remarks, "Badiou manages to make Beckett both vital and central and yet, at the same time, incidental to the mainstream of his own thought"⁶⁷: Beckett poses him a problem. It is the problem of the historicity of values, which reflects back onto the whole of his theory of ethics.

It is probably relevant to remember, in this sense, that the Beckettian virtues of exactitude, courage, and moderation correspond with the three moral qualities needed in Badiou's ethic of truths as it "tries to ward off Evil [the three modes of which are simulacrum or terror, betrayal, and disaster], through its effective and tenacious inclusion in the process of a truth." This ethic, he writes, "combines, then, under the imperative to 'Keep going!', resources of discernment (do not fall for simulacra), of courage (do not give up), and of moderation [réserve] (do not get carried away to the extremes of Totality)"⁶⁸. The sequential reversal that has to take place when accounting for Beckett's work gives us an index as to what is untenable in Badiou's ethics: the fact that it is, precisely, incapable of accounting for the ethical activity itself. The eventual "critical decision"⁶⁹, as "ontological decision"⁷⁰, is explicitly pre-ethical, and the fidelity due to it, actually extra-ethical. The event leaves the entirety of the ethical determination to be done, and it is only afterwards, and outside it, that the question of value finds its belated, agonizing moment; in the blind leap of the wager, and in the time regime of the "future anterior"⁷¹. It can only therefore take on the ready-available forms of traditional humanist morals – including the concept of Evil, capitalized. So

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, pp 100-101 and 102. A similar contradiction is perceptible in the function given to art as truth procedure: does the work of art enact the procedure itself, or does it only preserve the truth that has appeared, before and outside it? – "Il arrive que quelque chose arrive. Que quelque chose nous arrive. Et ces points d'exception, dont toute vérité procède, l'art a pour mission de les garder, de les faire briller, de les détenir, stellaires, dans le tissu reconstitué de notre patience". (Beckett, *L'incroyable désir*, *op. cit.*, p. 79).

⁶⁷ "Beckett and Badiou", *op. cit.*, p. 101.

⁶⁸ *Ethics*, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

⁶⁹ *L'Être et l'événement*, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 169.

⁷¹ The concept of the *futur antérieur* as time regime for the truth procedure is developed within the theory of the relationship between subject and truth, of the undecidable and the *forçage*, in particular in "Méditation trente-cinq" of *L'Être et l'événement*, entitled "Théorie du sujet" (*L'Être et l'événement* (Paris: Seuil, 1988), pp. 429-447).

that the three maxims can also read: find a way out of the totalities of the dictate, out of the “the absolute authority of truth nomination”⁷²; find the historical dimension of ethics, to ensure us against the no man’s land of the generic.

It is not only the poetic in Beckett that forces Badiou to take into account the problem of value. There is also the sticking point of the “Age of poets”, which haunts him with the quandary of modernity. His thesis is that between Mallarmé and Celan, with Hölderlin as early visionary, philosophy suffered a century-long eclipse, while the work of thought was taken over by poetry: the task of philosophy now is to insist that Celan has brought this age to a close, and to make sure that this de-suturing will once again eject the question of art in its position as transcendent “condition” for philosophy. Yet modernist poetry still fascinates him, and it is Mallarmé, Rimbaud, that he keeps turning to, to theorize the event as irruption of the new – of the “*frisson nouveau*”⁷³. In this love-hate relationship, there must a degree of perplexity as to the advantages in the expulsion of poetry from the horizon of thought. Questioned on this choice of poets in an interview by Charles Ramond⁷⁴, Badiou explains:

I can only point to a subjective, capricious, arbitrary element, and maybe also to one other thing [...]: the way in which, for a philosopher, a certain type of poem guides or orientates speculation. I appreciate, I admire, I frequent and learn by heart Hugo and La Fontaine: I appreciate them extremely. [...] Let’s say that the difference will fall between a poetic condition in which I accept to be only the one who receives, appreciates and tastes the immanent truth of the poems in question, and then the use I can make of other poets, from inside the elaboration of philosophical categories themselves: which I call poetry made to condition philosophy, which after all is not its entirely normal, its natural status: that is not what it is made for, but maybe precisely a certain type of modern poetry is more made for that than another.⁷⁵

The commentary is still knotted in a contradiction, and it is only in the channelling of one type of poetry into the delimited period of the Age of poets that it can find a way to resolve his ambivalence. When the interviewer presses him to clarify the actual nature, in his theory, of the articulation between poetry and philosophy, he reaches the uncomfortable core of the problem:

⁷² *Ethics*, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

⁷³ “La Poésie en condition de la philosophie”, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 65-75.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

Don't forget that I support this claim about these [modern] poets in one singular thesis, which I don't support for poetry in general. [...] In this period [...], the question of knowing what exactly distinguishes the ambitions of philosophy or of speculation and the ambitions of poetry becomes a difficult question to decide. [...] In my terms, it is an "age"; but this epochal confusion is unnecessary: because at bottom, the most general definition of poetry is that what it's interested in, in the sensible, is its capacity of presence as such. It is therefore not necessarily devoted to the presence of the un-presentable or the presentation of the subtractive or the appearing of the disappearing; to my mind it is devoted rather to capturing in language the singularity of sensible presence, and to doing what apparently language is powerless to do: name not the category of the thing, but the thing itself, as it presents itself. And at bottom, the poem is dedicated not so much to the sunset in general but to this sunset, not so much to the colour of the tile in general but the colour of *these very tiles*.⁷⁶

Poetry "in general" could be accounted for in the most ordinary terms of phenomenological aesthetics, with a reliance on the Kantian concepts of taste and personal opinion, of the sensible and its "universal without concept". But then modernity would indeed have to exempt itself from such aesthetics: with the insistence of the remainder, it keeps Badiou's doctrine of the event open onto the question of historicity, which Baudelaire first identified in coining the concept of modernity as "a rational and historical theory of the beautiful, in opposition to the theory of the beautiful as unique and absolute"⁷⁷. In particular, it keeps open the problem of the ethical quality of the new, as is attested in the very pertinent text which Badiou wrote as a preface to the English edition of *Ethics*. This is listed as number three in the four points that he indicates as the unresolved difficulties which he is currently working on:

The subject cannot be conceived exclusively as the subject faithful to the event. This point in particular has significant ethical implications. For I was previously unable to explain the appearance of reactionary innovations. My whole theory of the new confined it to the truth-procedures. But when all is said and done, it is obvious that reaction, and even the powers of death, can be stamped with the creative force of an event.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

⁷⁷ "Une théorie rationnelle et historique du beau, en opposition avec la théorie du beau unique et absolu" (Charles Baudelaire, *Le Peintre de la vie moderne*, in *Œuvres complètes* (Paris : Gallimard, 1976), p. 685).

⁷⁸ *Ethics*, *op. cit.*, p. lvii.

This is precisely the bone of contention in the whole modernist debate, and that which, at least in the terms of its Anglo-Saxon branch, marks the difference between the proto-fascist conception of the radically *new* as developed in T.E. Hulme's neo-classic, anti-historical, anti-linguistic theory of art⁷⁹, and the theory of the *modern* as "time sense"⁸⁰, to use Gertrude Stein's expression: as the sense of the historical and the historicity of sense. The difference also between Wyndham Lewis's view of the artistic *new* as the totalitarian design (both formal and political) of the artist as tyrant⁸¹, and Rimbaud's earlier intuition of the poetic modern, the "*en avant*" of poetry⁸², as the process of ethical invention: "l'homme [...] se travaillant"⁸³ – man working at his own humanity.

The poetic, as the force of modernity in language, keeps Badiou on this shifting ground where doctrines must confront the movement of the problematic. It might be worth noting that the book on ethics was a commission, and clearly not a necessity springing from the course of his work in its own terms. Also worth noting, the fact that despite the central importance Badiou gives to poetry everywhere in his writings, the book makes no mention of the question of art. Both ethics and poetics are treated as regional concerns, in his work, and yet they function everywhere both as blind-spots and as critical spurs. In *Ethics*, four new questions are raised, which all have to do with the effort to account for the centrally problematic issues in the doctrine of truth. The first "accept[s] that a situation cannot be understood simply as a multiple [...]. We must also take into account the network of relations it sustains, which involves making sense of the way a multiple appears in the situation"⁸⁴: the move is from the morals of numericity to a conception of ethical production within a signifying system. The second concerns the nature of the evental truth itself, and its temporality:

Today I can no longer maintain that the only trace left by an event in the situation it affects is the name given to that event. This idea presumed, in effect, that there were two events rather than one (the event-event, and the event-naming), and likewise two subjects rather than one (the subject who names the event, and the subject who is faithful

⁷⁹ For fuller treatment of this question, may I refer the reader to my comments on Hulme in "L'Infini et la valeur: enjeux de la modernité avec T.E. Hulme", in Ronald Shusterman ed., *L'Infini*, (Bordeaux: Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux, 2002), pp. 47-65.

⁸⁰ Gertrude Stein, "Composition as Explanation", *Look at Me Now and Here I am. Writings and Lectures 1909-1945* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1971), pp. 21-30, p. 22.

⁸¹ Wyndham Lewis, *The Caliph's Design. Architects! Where is Your Vortex?* (1919), (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Press, 1986).

⁸² "Enormité devenant norme, absorbée par tous, [le poète] serait vraiment un multiplicateur de progrès ! [...] La Poésie ne rythmera plus l'action; elle sera *en avant*." (Letter to Paul Demeny, 15th May 1871, in *Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), pp. 249-254, p. 252)

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 251.

⁸⁴ *Ethics*, *op. cit.*, p. lvi.

to the event). So now I posit that an event is implicative
[...] When it takes place, the event decides its value.⁸⁵

The event, and the value – semantic and ethical – of the event, are now intertwined into one simultaneous process, which is the time of signification. So that “the ontological theory of the event”, Badiou anticipates, will need “to be completed by a logical theory”⁸⁶. The grammar of *logos* is still not the full historicity of language, far from it; yet it is one distinct step away from the anti-linguistics of the mathematical letter. And lastly the fourth question takes Badiou on to the need to account for the becoming of truths; for “logical transformations”: “the question of how truths appear, whereas up to this point I had considered only their being (i.e. the fact that truths are generic multiplicities)”⁸⁷. All four questions converge around the gradual and still reluctant recognition of historicity, even if it is in near phenomenological terms, and of language, as the process where the possibilities of meaning, subjectivity, and society, are at work. Badiou’s Platonic mistrust of the sophistry of language is an impatience with the poststructuralist *doxa* of the alienation of the subject and the impossibility of truthful meaning. But that is not language: it is only one theory of language – and it is not Saussure’s. What he is currently pulled towards is the intuition of language as what Wittgenstein calls “form of life”; the very medium of ethical possibility.

The article on Beckett in *Conditions* concludes on a definition of the work of art as the process by which the inessentials of life are transmuted into the ethical no man’s land of genericity – from *vie* to *vide*: “It is [...] what I would like to call the writing of the generic: to present in art the passage from the unhappiness of life and the visible to the happiness of a veridical rousing of the void”⁸⁸. The Beckettian “ill said” being identified with “poetic name, the name without signification”⁸⁹, which excepts itself from language to bring forth this space beyond value. But Beckett’s poetics of “ill saying”, of “misusing” language and “leaving,” he says, “nothing undone that might contribute to its falling into disrepute”⁹⁰, is anything but a superseding of language, or an ethical voiding. It is, to be precise, an un-*wording*, which takes language out of the “Grammar and Style” of “official English”⁹¹ to make it “express things other than words”⁹². Which is, in Beckett’s own terms, “when language is most efficiently used”⁹³: freed from a linguistics of

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. lvi-lvii.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. lvii.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. lvii-lviii.

⁸⁸ *Conditions, op. cit.*, p. 366.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 351.

⁹⁰ Samuel Beckett, *Disjecta. Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*, Ruby Cohn ed. (New York: Grove Press, 1984), p. 172.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 171.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 125.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 171.

a priori units and reified counters, from all “poetics of nomination”⁹⁴, and *en avant*, at work in the time sense (Beckett talks of the work of art as time-maker, as time-factory)⁹⁵, towards a “savoir-vivre”⁹⁶. An essaying in the futurity of ethics. In “Le Monde et le pantalon”⁹⁷, Beckett takes the opportunity of writing about contemporary painting to mark the difference between the morals of aesthetics, as practised by traditional art criticism, and the ethical criticality of “la malfaçon créatrice voulue”⁹⁸: the “ill made” painting is “a painting with a future” [“un tableau d’avenir”], in that it induces the ill saying which is the texture of life: “the only life that counts, that of featherless bipeds”⁹⁹. About the art of the van Velde brothers, he writes: “The thing is that, at bottom, painting doesn’t interest them [or “beauty”, or “truth”¹⁰⁰]. What interests them is the human condition.”¹⁰¹ This is the criticality of art, which is so powerful in Beckett’s own work that it brings the question of ethics and language regularly back in Badiou’s field of vision.

The current Badiou phenomenon makes sense at a time when the linguistic turn is being reassessed, and the promises of a turn to ethics much discussed. It makes clear what is, again, at issue: what we make of language, when rethinking the anthropological. In itself, it is nevertheless much less on an event than, say, the publication last January of Saussure’s *Ecrits de linguistique générale*¹⁰², which might be the opportunity for a complete rereading his philosophy of language. We might rediscover a Saussure who is not so much a theorist of the immanent arbitrariness of the sign, in the traditional semiotics interpretation of the *Cours* as edited by Bally and Sechehaye, but a thinker of value. The manuscripts published in this new volume are mostly the autograph fragments of his planned book on general linguistics, which were only unearthed in 1996, and one crucial point in it is the introduction, along with the central conceptual couple of *langue* et *parole*, of the distinctly non-formalist concept of *discours*, which precisely opens onto the ethical and social dimension of language. This rereading might start to establish that the mutual exclusion of language and ethics,

⁹⁴ *Conditions, op. cit.*, p. 350.

⁹⁵ He talks of Abraham van Velde’s painting as “faiseur de temps”, “usine à temps” (*Disjecta, op. cit.*, p. 125).

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

⁹⁷ « La peinture des van Velde ou le Monde et le pantalon » (in *Disjecta, op. cit.*, pp. 118-132). This is Beckett’s first publication in French, and he has not given a translation of it in English. The translations offered here are mine.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

¹⁰² Ferdinand de Saussure, *Ecrits de linguistique générale*, Simon Bouquet and Rudolf Engler eds., (Paris : Gallimard, 2002).

which always takes us back surreptitiously to the mutual exclusion of form and content, is a non-issue, and one from which we can move on.