

such description. The very fact that fidelity involves 'investigations' means that its 'procedure' resembles the production of a form of knowledge (*EE*, 365).

Of course, what sets fidelity apart from knowledge is the fact that it is future-orientated and has no prior sense of its own direction. This is the case with the theme of departure in Hölderlin, or of anabasis in Xenophon, Saint-John Perse, and Celan (anabasis being a disciplined and inventive progress that is also hazardous and erratic).⁴⁷ Fidelity does not confirm a given situation in its existence. It rather perceives the fractures in the situation, its singularities, its fundamental instability. Any given situation is 'on the edge of the void' (*EE*, 289). This means that the regulatory apparatus at stake in it may always malfunction. The subject of a truth is aware of this possibility. Fidelity is never 'le faible vouloir d'une conservation', a feeble will to conserve (*ibid.*). It is a will to move on, a commitment to the future anterior. By the same token, however, the criteria that faithful subjects use in their investigation, in the work of separation and connection, are extremely uncertain. There is no law that determines or guides their task, which is therefore forbiddingly difficult. Indeed, it is 'almost impossible', as Badiou says of Marivaux, whose plays provide some good examples of fidelity, in Badiou's sense of the word (*EE*, 257). The difficulty is hardly surprising, given how close to the void the faithful subject must remain. None the less, fidelity finally produces a coherent work, an 'event-based consistency [consistance événementielle]' beyond the 'immediate sphere' of the event (*PP*, 77).

Thus the subject is not simply faithful to a truth that precedes him or her. He or she is also faithful in anticipation. Fidelity is never fidelity to a whole truth. Nor is it a form of adherence to a dogma. Fidelity to Marx is not the same as Marxism. However stark his differences with Freud, Lacan is faithful to the event of Freud where the American Freudians are not.⁴⁸ For the same reason, there can be 'different fidelities' to the same event that are produced according to different criteria (*EE*, 258). The exact meaning of fidelity becomes apparent if we contrast it with betrayal, as exemplified in the Thermidorean. Badiou devotes a whole essay to this figure.⁴⁹ The Thermidorean is a paradigm of ethical failure. The overthrow of Robespierre on 9 Thermidor brings a chapter of revolutionary history to a close. But that is not because the grim logic of the Revolution is finally exposed as such. Nor is it because the revolutionary impetus has run up against insuperable obstacles. Thermidor is

⁴⁷ See *LS*, 119–39.

⁴⁸ See for instance *EE*, 369, 474.

⁴⁹ 'Qu'est qu'un Thermidorien?', *AB*, 139–54.

not a sign that a particular historical truth has reached the logical end of its trajectory. There is no such 'logical end'. Yet the fact that there is no objective logic to Thermidor does not mean that Thermidoreans do not declare there to be one, a logic of historical events, an economic logic, or a logic of power. This logic prevails over subjective prescription. It even constitutes what Badiou calls a 'révisionnisme événementiel'.⁵⁰ Thermidoreans make truth quite precisely unthinkable. Thermidor is not an objective disaster but a collapse of subjectivity, an inward exhaustion ('épuisement', *AB*, 142). For the Thermidorean, the gains involved are obvious and indisputable: prosperity, efficiency, stability, tranquillity, security. But Thermidor also spells a retreat from subjectivity, the return to mere 'perseverance in being', the death of political invention and ethics together. The Thermidorean decides not to keep going. He or she gives up on his or her desire.

AESTHETICS AND THE 'WAITING SUBJECT'

So far, however, I have missed out one very important strand in Badiou's ethics. This emerges from his insistence that truths appear in several distinct domains. In *Théorie du sujet* (1982), Badiou asserts that 'every subject is political' (*TS*, 79). By the time he writes *Philosophie et politique* (1991), however, he has changed his mind: every subject is rare and depends on an event.⁵¹ This is not just a modification of the earlier definition. It is a different kind of definition. It is made possible by Badiou's abandonment of the philosophical practice of what he calls suture.⁵² 'Suture' is the philosophical conflation of truth with a single, privileged domain at the expense of the others. There are plenty of examples of this tendency: Heidegger (poetry), positivism (science), Levinas (love), Marxism 'in its dominant, canonical form' (politics, *MP*, 42). Plato ends up extolling the virtues of the philosopher-king, Nietzsche those of the philosopher-poet, Husserl those of the philosopher as rigorous scientist. If philosophical modesty means renouncing the notion that philosophy can speak the truth, it also means renouncing the philosophical identification with a particular kind of truth. For Badiou, the refusal of suture becomes an ethical principle. He calls for a work of 'de-suture' (*MP*, 48) in which theoretical work is no longer assimilated to a single form of truth-procedure.

⁵⁰ 'Huit thèses sur l'universel', in Jelica Sumic (ed.), *Universel, singulier, sujet* (Paris: Éditions Kimé, 2000), 12–20, p. 13.

⁵¹ See *CV*, 215–50, especially at p. 234, n. 41.

⁵² Badiou's most succinct account of this concept is in *MP*, 41–8.

Badiou's aesthetics starts out with a rejection of suture. As a truth-procedure or truth-procedures, art is 'irreducible to philosophy' (*PM*, 21). It is not an object of and is not to be apprehended by philosophical thought. In the strict sense, the concept of an aesthetics—of a philosophical theory of art—is therefore misguided. Art is not the vehicle of a thought which philosophy can express better than it can. It is in itself a distinctive form of thought. This thought is intrinsic to artworks, and not simply their cause. It is both immanent and singular: immanent, in that 'art is rigorously co-extensive with the truths it displays [prodigue]'; singular, in that these truths 'are given nowhere else but in art' (*ibid.*). If they are irreducible to philosophy, they are equally 'irreducible to the other truths' (*ibid.*). Philosophy, then, does not interpret works of art. Its concern is not aesthetics but 'inaesthetics' (*PM*, 7). The philosopher does not master art, but declares the existence of artistic truths, shows that they are there, distinguishes them carefully from the world of *doxa*. He or she arranges them in relation to other truths contemporary with them, thus telling us about their 'compossibility'. But the philosopher cannot say what art says better than art says it itself. After his own fashion, Plato knew this: unlike philosophy, art cannot be 'the thought of thought' (*PM*, 46). But for Plato, art is *merely* a singular thought: that is why he wants to see it banished. For Badiou, on the other hand, the singularity of artistic truth is the very source of its importance.

There is, however, a problem here. If art is a distinctive form of thought, then Badiou appears to entertain two different conceptions of the truth-procedure in art, one of which is more consistent with his larger theory of the truth-procedure than the other. Particular works of art, he says, are not truths. An artistic truth is a procedure 'composed of' works (*PM*, 24). The work of art is a 'local actualization' of a truth (*PM*, 25). Truths are what constitute the unities of art, not artists or works. As we might expect, Badiou asserts that a 'configuration' of works appears in the wake of an event ('dans la dimension postévénementielle', *ibid.*). Any such configuration breaks with a previous one. Examples would include the classical style in music from Haydn to Beethoven and the novel 'from Cervantes to Joyce' (*PM*, 26–7). It would seem logical for Badiou to focus on large aesthetic categories, like those of genre. In fact, the categories that most interest him, like theatre, cinema, and modern poetry, are still larger than that.

Take modern poetry, for example. (This effectively includes Beckett's prose; until recently, Badiou has shown very little specific interest in the novel or novelists, and tends to treat Beckett as a poet in prose.) Modern poetry is a

singular truth-procedure. It produces 'new methods of poetic thought, a new exploration [prospection] of linguistic resources' (*PM*, 41). The particularity of modern poetry lies in its awareness of the limited jurisdiction of its truths, their powerlessness, of the existence of other truths. Thus it only half-says what it has to say. In this respect, Pessoa, who splits himself into different poets, is perhaps the great representative of modernity. Pessoa invents 'a non-classical logic' (*PM*, 66), subverting the principle of non-contradiction. His poetry thrives on equivocation, on simultaneous affirmation and negation. In Pessoa, the principle of heteronymy—the poet Pessoa is also the poets Caetano, Campos, and Reis—is precisely a recognition that truths are plural. Pessoa teaches us 'to think only in terms of multiple singularities' (*PM*, 73). He installs a contingent multiplicity at the very origin of his poetry. He finally presents us with the modern world itself, a world deserted by the gods, a world of actual infinity and the void.

If modern poetry is obscure, that obscurity is a function of its limits, its recognition of the boundary between what it can name and what remains unnameable to it ('son innommable propre', *PM*, 42). Badiou remains wedded to a hermetic conception of poetry. But that is a consequence of his seeing modern poetry as a singular kind of thought. Modern poetry 'de-objectifies' the world (*PM*, 50). It tells us that the world is not an object or a collection of objects. This is what Mallarmé meant when he said that poetry presents us with the 'pure notion' (*ibid.*). Mallarmé's poems are not objects to be interpreted, but forms of labour in which the reader participates. This does not mean, however, that his poetry is 'subjective': the subject in Mallarmé is actually 'radically anonymous' (*PM*, 51). Modern poetry eclipses both subject and object. What we are left with, in between, as it were, is the 'obscure scintillation' of an enigmatic surface (*PM*, 52). The 'pure notion' is an enigmatic form of thought precisely because it is aware of its own limits. From Mallarmé to Celan, the trajectory of modern poetry consists of different fidelities to the poetics of the 'enigmatic surface'. Though Badiou does not exactly say so, it is clear that, seen in this way, modern poetry begins with the event that is Mallarmé himself.

However, the poetic event does not simply initiate a procedure, either in modern poetry or in poetry in general. Badiou also offers us another conception of poetry which places the poem, not as coming after the event, but as prior to it, as an anticipation, conjuration, or invocation of an event that may or may not take place. This conception seems at odds with his larger account of truths. For Mallarmé in the melancholy years after the suppression of the Commune,

for example, poetry becomes a form of 'restricted action' at a time when politics has failed (*PM*, 54). At such a time, poetry takes 'as its point of departure', not the event, but its absence (*ibid.*). The poem meditates on the lack of an event, on the conditions that might make events possible again. Thus, in certain circumstances, 'literature can name a real to which politics would remain closed' (*PP*, 31). Poetry performs a work of subtraction, a clearing of the ground or stripping away. Celan's poetry explores the possibility, for example, of a fragile, aleatory break with stasis,⁵³ in a manner that begs comparison with Beckett. Celan's poetry works, not towards a truth that is grasped in its supposed totality, but towards the possibility of freedom. He knows that there is inconsistency in being. He seeks to mimic it, breaking up the consistencies of his world in the hope of an event. Celan provides a succinct expression of his own poetic imperative in Badiou's favourite quotation from his poetry: 'Sur les inconsistances | s'appuyer' (*PM*, 58).⁵⁴ I shall follow Hallward in not daring to retranslate this, merely noting that Badiou himself comes close to giving his own version of it as 'Think irreconcilable multiplicity!'⁵⁵

The work of subtraction is the poet's labour. Truths appear in 'the retreat of all things' (*PM*, 80), or as the world is subtracted to make way for them. Casting his net beyond modern poetry, Badiou asserts that the pre-Islamic Arab poet Labid ben Rabi'a finds he can attribute 'no poetic chance to a truth other than, perhaps, where there is only desert, or only the abyss' (*PM*, 78). Prompted by Labid, Badiou spawns metaphors for the destitution that precedes the event. Every truth—every poetic truth, in particular—is haunted by the fear 'that there is only the indifferent place, sand, rain, the ocean, the abyss' (*PM*, 81).⁵⁶ The 'indifferent place' is what I have been calling the remainder. If, as I've said, for Badiou, the remainder is antithetical to a purely affirmative philosophy and has practically no explicit place in his developed philosophical system, as I've also said, the pathos of intermittency that springs from the alternation of event and remainder repeatedly haunts his accounts of poetry. The logic at stake is stark enough. In an era that witnesses the collapse

⁵³ See *PM*, 56.

⁵⁴ Paul Celan, *Zeitschrift I, Gesammelte Werke*, 5 vols. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1989), iii, 86: 'An die Haltlosigkeit | sich schmeigen'. 'Haltlosigkeit' is more exactly translated as 'unsteadiness' or 'unfoundedness'. Elsewhere, Badiou links the quotation to the theme of justice. See *IT*, 77. See also Hallward, *BA*, p. 116.

⁵⁵ See 'L'Âge des poètes', in Jacques Rancière (ed.), *La Politique des poètes: Pourquoi des poètes en temps de détresse* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1992), 21–38, 32.

⁵⁶ Fascinatingly, the metaphor of the desert recurs in Badiou's writings about Lyotard in particular. See for instance 'Custos, quid noctis?', *Critique*, 40/450 (Nov. 1984), 851–63, p. 863.

of the great historical logics, history breaks down into a plurality of micro-sequences. Since these are not motivated or constrained by any overarching sequence, they must necessarily be contingent. The crucial decision that Badiou makes is to think historical micro-sequences as not only contingent but rare. Events and truths appear only against the backcloth of the 'indifferent place'. If art is a distinctive form of thought, then what it thinks above all is the event and its rarity in relation to this place, or the remainder.

Certainly, modern poetry is made up of such thought. At one point in his study of Deleuze, Badiou writes of events as not just 'rare fragments of truth', but specifically fragments 'that traverse here and there our bleak world' (*DE*, 91). Having done so, in the gesture of the affirmative philosopher, he briskly shrugs his shoulders: in this respect, 'our world is like any other' (*ibid.*). The intermittency of truths is the banally self-evident condition of the philosophical affirmation. But on Badiou's own account of it, it does not appear as such to the modern poet, and the modern poet does not repeat the philosopher's gesture (as indeed, according to the principle of 'de-saturation', he or she logically must not repeat it). Celan and Mandelstam stay with the event *by* staying with the 'bleak world', by keeping it steadily in view. Badiou explicitly says of Mandelstam, for example, that his poetic thought is founded, not on a truth, but on a conviction of 'historical lostness' ('égarement').⁵⁷ Furthermore, he says it in a book about the politics of poetry and its significance in a time of political distress. It is here that we may return at last to that key quotation from the ninth meditation in *L'Être et l'événement*. It is the modern poet who is the true 'guetteur'. Badiou's identification of the 'guetteur' with the political subject is an aberration, and not one he usually repeats elsewhere. The 'subject in waiting' is chiefly the aesthetic and not the political (nor, for that matter, the scientific or amorous) subject. It is the poet who watches out for and awaits the event when it seems recalcitrant or unforthcoming. In modern poetry, as contrasted with politics, we find a new 'subjectivité de l'attente'. This concept of subjectivity is not the one that is dominant in Badiou's work, but it is much in evidence in *Le Siècle*.

In *Le Siècle*, Badiou is concerned with a particular philosophical project. The proper philosophical response to what he calls the 'siècle-bête' (*LS*, 30) is an account, not of what happened in the twentieth century, but what was thought in it. The century is what counted in it—a set of truths—and nothing more. *Le Siècle* is therefore a philosophical history of subjectivities: the philosopher

⁵⁷ 'L'Âge des poètes', 26.

concentrates on events and emergent subjectivities and brackets off the desert landscape. But the subjectivities in question include poetic subjectivities. Modern poetry serves as one of the book's major examples, and the modern poetic project turns out to be strikingly at odds with that of *Le Siècle* itself. That the book actually gets its title from a modern poem (by Mandelstam) only enhances the sense of discrepancy. The poets repeatedly turn in a different direction from the one the philosopher is committed to taking. 'As Heidegger says', the modern poet is "the guardian of the Open" (LS, 37); that is, he or she is a custodian, not of a truth or truths, but of the conditions which make it possible for a truth to appear. It will by now be obvious, however, that Badiou's conception of 'openness' is as different from Heidegger's as his conception of the event is from *Ereignis* or *aletheia*.

For the poet can no longer be what he or she was in the nineteenth century, a figure of the vanguard. He or she is rather a 'secret exception'. Modern poets commit themselves to 'a poetics of waiting', a poetics of the threshold (LS, 39). One example would be Breton's 'poétique du veilleur', his 'poetics of the lookout' amidst the horrors of 1937 (LS, 40). Mandelstam, too, creates a 'subjectivity of waiting' under Stalin (LS, 39). We can quickly add other examples, particularly if we stretch our definition of poetry a little: Césaire in Martinique in the 1940s and 1950s, Coetzee in South Africa in the 1980s and 1990s. Badiou returns to the very term he used in the ninth meditation: 'the figure of the observer [gchetteur] is one of the great artistic figures of the century' (LS, 41). Vigilance—which Badiou also closely associates with Beckett—is an aspect of a subjectivity of the interim, the threshold, the *déchet*, dead time. Crucially, the poet never crosses the threshold, as the militant must do.

Celan, however, is perhaps the most interesting case, and the one in which the analogies with Beckett are most striking. For Celan does not commit himself to a 'subjectivité de l'attente' in the midst of disaster. He commits himself after it. He insists that we wait to catch up with disaster. Celan's 'Anabasis' begins with the image of a narrow space between walls that is precisely reminiscent of the same image in Beckett's *Lessness*, on which, as we saw earlier, Badiou also comments.⁵⁸ In a phrase of great poignancy and resonance, Celan invokes this narrow space as an 'unwegsam-wahre | . . . | in die herzelle Zukunft', an 'impassable-true', a blocked passage to 'the heart-bright future'.⁵⁹ Badiou picks

⁵⁸ See p. 37.

⁵⁹ See LS, 128–30; Paul Celan, *Gedichte*, 2 vols. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1975), ii. 256; translation mine.

up on Martine Broda's translation of 'unwegsam-wahre' as 'impracticable-vrai'.⁶⁰ Celan's is a truth that is unlike a political truth precisely in that it cannot be put into practice. In effect, Celan says 'not yet'. In another context, this is precisely what Mao says.⁶¹ It is also what the political subject says in a time of political reaction (like the present) which gives itself out as a time of resolution, reconciliation, or synthesis. There is a difference at stake, however, that is certainly one of tone or nuance, but where tone and nuance spell a crucial distinction between modes of subjectification. What Badiou directs us to, as does Rancière, and, like Rancière, probably in spite of himself, is an aesthetic melancholy which recognizes that the temporality of art or, perhaps better, the temporality with which art endows the world, is quite different from but also instructive for that of politics.

If the truth-procedure of modern poetry departs from philosophical procedure, even more importantly, perhaps, it also departs from the truth-procedures of modern politics. A properly constructive politics categorically rejects all pathos. On this point, Badiou is consistent and emphatic. For politics insists on renewal *ab ovo*. Starting out from an event, 'the subjective will can realize unprecedented possibilities in the world' (LS, 142). The modern militant dreams of creating a new political foundation. That is the great modern political venture. But Mandelstam, Celan, and Beckett are all concerned with blockages in its trajectory, baulkings of the vector in question. Modern poetry is irresistibly deflected in the direction of the pathos of intermittency. Perhaps in spite of himself, Badiou has repeatedly to admit this of modern poetry, at least, in *Le Siècle*. At the same time, he admits it without letting the admission affect his larger philosophical arguments or filter through into his accounts of modern politics. To put the point rather differently: Badiou is far too responsive to modern poetry and far too good a judge of it not to introduce certain great modern poets into his account of the century, though he thereby risks creating a specific turbulence in his thought as a whole. The modern poet thinks the event, or, at least, the possibility of the event, but also recognizes that the event cannot be thought apart from its remainder.

This has implications for the ethics of artistic practice. It has implications, above all, for the meaning of fidelity relative to artistic truth-procedures. Take for example Badiou's argument with regard to Shalamov, whose accounts of life in the Gulag in *Kolyma* he contrasts favourably with Solzhenitsyn's.

⁶⁰ See LS, 128–30.

⁶¹ See LS, 91–5.

Badiou does not appear to conceive of Shalamov as the subject of an event. He does not present him, for example, as faithful to a Marxist–Leninist truth in the teeth of the ravages of Stalinism. Yet Shalamov is equipped with a tenacity that is close in its character to fidelity. He can hardly be said to be caught up in the progress of a truth; in that respect, his world is that of the ‘indifferent place’, the remainder. Yet, as an inmate of the camps, he is none the less able to hold to certain points of consciousness and practice which check what Badiou calls his ‘decomposition’ as a subject (PP, 36). Shalamov’s ethical adversary is not so much the henchmen of the State as camp low-life, the cheats, beggars, and petty criminals. To Badiou’s way of thinking, these figures belong with the Thermidoreans on the one hand and the lumpenproletariat of the *Eighteenth Brumaire* on the other. In his opposition to their cast of mind, what Shalamov asserts, what he even invents, is ‘non-innocence’ (PP, 39). Stalin’s purges are feasible precisely because they are massacres of innocents, those who have forsaken or never arrived at political subjectivity, never known that they might be capable of unity and political action. *Kolyma* is a grittily sustained testimony to the importance of the subjectivity they lack. This ‘exemplary and transmissible form of consciousness’ is what Shalamov bequeaths to the future subjects of other emancipatory truths (PP, 41).

Shalamov’s fidelity, then, is not exactly that of faithful subjects in Badiou’s more abstract, philosophical accounts of them. Nor is the fidelity that Badiou associates with Mallarmé which, as we’ll see, he also pointedly contrasts with Beckett’s. For the moment, however, I want rather to focus on the contrast between Mallarmé and Rimbaud. For Badiou, Mallarmé’s fidelity manifests itself, above all, as patience. This is precisely what Rimbaud lacks. Like Beckett, Badiou is powerfully drawn to Rimbaud.⁶² He uses Rimbaud’s concept of ‘logical revolt’ to characterize the philosophical enterprise itself (IT, 39; DP, 5). The passages of vehement denunciation in Badiou’s political writings share some of Rimbaud’s inventive rage and satirical flair, and appear to owe a stylistic debt to him. (*Mutatis mutandis*, this is also the case with the furious resistances of Beckett’s Unnameable to voices that are not its own). But in ‘La Méthode de Rimbaud: L’Interruption’, Badiou sets himself at a certain distance from Rimbaud. He focuses on what he calls the moments of ‘interruption’ in Rimbaud’s poems, moments at which they appear to turn in a radically different direction, in a shift most commonly indicated by a

⁶² On Beckett’s love of Rimbaud, see for instance Knowlson, *DF*, 126, 137, 138, 160, 188, 189, 686.

‘non’, ‘mais’, or ‘assez’. These caesurae mark the point at which Rimbaud feels that a promise cannot, indeed must not be sustained. They are in themselves what the poems are most concerned to engineer. At such moments, Rimbaud defects from the very vision or sense of grace that he appears to be about to confirm, and lapses into its opposite, ennui, nullity:

In ‘Le Bateau ivre’, after a deluge of parnassian rhetoric, on the very threshold of a radiant promise—‘You million golden birds, the Strength to come’—[we find] the [lines] ‘I’ve wept too much, it’s true. Dawn breaks my heart. | All moons are atrocious, all suns bitter’, which function as an abolition, or the revenge of a degree zero of desire. (CS, 131)⁶³

On the verge of proclaiming the destruction of history and the inauguration of a new world, Rimbaud collapses into a muted evocation of the inexorability of the world as it is already given. This is not to say that his poems ultimately throttle the visionary impulse. The point is rather that, again and again, they trace the fissure between what the world can promise in the way of present redemption, and the threat it also holds of repetition, immobility, changelessness. Radical doubt constantly afflicts the Rimbaudian epiphany. A possible prose is always lurking within the poem. It is very important to note that, for Badiou, Beckett reverses this structure: in later Beckett, at least, there is a poem latent in the prose.⁶⁴

Rimbaud’s poetry is about the enigma of this kind of interruption. It would be wrong to suppose, however, that, for Badiou, the visionary dimension to Rimbaud’s work is essentially romantic. Quoting from ‘Une saison en enfer’, he remarks for example that the famous ‘derangement of all the senses [le dérèglement de tous les sens] accustoms us to “seeing, fair and square, a mosque where there was a factory”’ (CS, 136).⁶⁵ It was precisely this vision of France that Mitterrand’s first minister, Pierre Mauroy, flinched from when he responded to a massive French strike on behalf of immigrant workers with an adamant refusal to bow before ‘subversive Shi-ites’ and foreigners ‘with no sense of French realities’ (CS, 137). Rimbaud’s vision is of the situation transformed from the point of view of the disregarded, those who

⁶³ The translation of the lines from Rimbaud is from *Collected Poems*, tr. with parallel French text, introd., and notes Martin Sorrell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 131. Badiou omits the question mark at the end of the first line quoted. Not surprisingly, the cadence of Beckett’s translation is better: ‘But no more tears. Dawns have broken my heart, | And every moon is torment, every sun bitterness’ (CP, 137).

⁶⁴ See for instance CS, 344–7.

⁶⁵ See Rimbaud, *Collected Poems*, 236. Badiou is actually slightly misquoting: the words in the original are ‘je voyais très-franchement une mosquée à la place d’une usine’.

have no stake, those who belong but are not included, the 'sans-part', as Rancière calls them.⁶⁶ At 'the opposite pole to the criminal errors [dérèpages criminels]' of State *doxa*, the Rimbaudian *dérèglement* involves 'the distortion [torsion] that is characteristic of a truth-procedure' (ibid.). Rimbaud sees the political situation from the vantage point of a possible truth. At the same time, however, his poems repeatedly twist in the gap between possible truth and constraining actuality. Rimbaud suspends them on the very point at which two incompatible figures of being are divided from one another. Thus Rimbaud's poetry is not strictly a poetry of an event and the truth that stems from it. It is a poetry poised on the edge of a truth-procedure, rather than engaged in one.

In this respect, for Badiou, Rimbaud is a great poet of undecidability. But he is also clearly the poet of a decision, a decision in favour of the second of the two 'figures of being'. Rimbaud consistently decides in favour of the prosaic universe. For Badiou, this decision is the most problematic aspect of Rimbaud's work. Rimbaud always turns in the direction of the 'déjà là', of the death or cancellation of promise (CS, 142). This leads in its turn to the Rimbaudian relish for abjection. It breeds a taste for what Badiou sees as a kind of 'abject sublime' that Proust, Beckett, and Genet will later share and that is significant for modern culture. What is more, the poems tend finally to rush into their decision. Ethically speaking, Rimbaud's haste and abruptness are very significant. His poems lack a strength that art can always learn from mathematics. Mathematical thought is a slow, methodical process of deliberation. It also grows slowly, over very long periods. By contrast, Rimbaud lacks patience. Badiou understands patience as a category of thought and a relationship to truth. He explicitly asserts that the question is not one of 'character traits' (CS, 149). For Rimbaud, it is only the prosaic or disenchanted world that sees patience as necessary. For Badiou, however, in the confrontation with undecidability, patience is crucial. Fidelity is a process of slow and painstaking deduction, a protracted and meticulous working-out for which, as far as Badiou is concerned, the model is clearly the mathematical proof.

Rimbaud is impatient. He knows that truth cannot be possessed, that it seizes us and not we it. But he wants his truth immediately, decisively, free at once of its stale entanglements with what already exists. Hence the quickness and intensity of his disappointments. In the end, he is impatient with the fact of undecidability itself. His most imperious desire is for incarnation, the

⁶⁶ See Rancière, *ME*, *passim*.

spontaneous and comprehensive embodiment of truth in experience. If truth is not given once and for all, as a whole—and for Badiou truths are not available 'all in one go'; this is one of his points of agreement with Heidegger⁶⁷—then, for Rimbaud, it is always better finally to suppose that it is not available at all. He has no interest in the pure singularity to which the event might lead. He is indifferent to the infinity of a truth without predicates. His greatness lies in the very urgency of his need for undecidability. But undecidability is of itself no guarantee of the possibility of radical change. Alas, truths do not automatically transfigure the given world. Most of the time, truth does not happen. Thus Rimbaud opts for glum despair. He even produces an ironic mimicry of a world that, it seems, cannot but be as it is. In this respect, Rimbaud is a postmodernist *avant la lettre*. The real pathos of Rimbaud, however, is that, as the logic of his despair gathers weight, he finally interrupts the progress of his very genius for interruption.

Like Rimbaud, Mallarmé belongs to the 'vacant time' ('temps atone') that follows the crushing of the Paris Commune (CS, 151).⁶⁸ Like Rimbaud, he is concerned to sustain a trace of the possibility of the event in his poetry. Badiou reads both poets as thinkers of the event and its undecidability. For both, poetry is concerned with the heterogeneity of events to the *ennui* of the world as it already exists. Mallarmé's apprehension of the event, however, is finer, more complex and subtle than Rimbaud's. Mallarmé is a poet of the modalities of the event as Rimbaud in his impatience cannot be. For Mallarmé, the condition of the event and of truth is one of extreme fragility. He is therefore preoccupied with the process of patient elaboration that will finally make a truth seem 'veridical', that will ultimately confirm a truth as knowledge. Thus, for example, in his remarkable analysis of 'A la nue accablante tu' in 'La Méthode de Mallarmé',⁶⁹ Badiou argues that Mallarmé makes meticulous use of certain 'vanishing terms' ('termes évanouissants', CS, 111). These terms register the event, but only as having faded or disappeared. Furthermore, Mallarmé also introduces a second set of terms into the poem which call the status of the first set in question. These secondary terms register the undecidability

⁶⁷ 'All cannot be thought in one go' is a phrase of Heidegger's that Derrida is fond of quoting. See for instance *Of Grammatology*, tr. with a preface Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 23. Badiou's agreement is clear for example in *Logiques des mondes*, and in 'L'Être et l'apparaître', *CT*, 179–200, especially at p. 190.

⁶⁸ Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe suggests that Badiou's interest as far as poetry is concerned is in modern poetry, which in effect is poetry 'after the Commune'. See 'Poésie, philosophie, politique', in Rancière, *La Politique des poètes*, 39–63, p. 43.

⁶⁹ CS, 108–29.

of the event. They are followed in their turn by a careful indication of the delicate choices involved in giving the event appropriate names.

In 'Ses purs ongles très haut', by contrast, Mallarmé provides a different set of terms. Unlike the 'termes évanouissants' of 'A la nue accablante tu', those in the second poem are irreplaceable. They do not serve as a trace of the event (the 'rêve vespéral' of the glorious sunset, *CS*, 114).⁷⁰ Nor do they cancel a previous cancellation, like the secondary terms in 'A la nue accablante tu'. Their purpose is rather what Badiou calls 'foreclosure' (*CS*, 116–17): they indicate certain limits to the power of nomination. The truth that appears in the wake of an event does not exhaust the whole of the situation in which it appears. As Badiou puts the point in the *Ethics*: 'At least one real element exists, one multiple existing in the situation, which remains inaccessible to truthful nominations' (*ES*, 85). This 'element' is unnameable, and, as we have seen, forcing the unnameable is for Badiou a form of evil. There is thus an ethics at stake in 'Ses purs ongles très haut'. By contrast, 'Prose (pour des Esseintes)' is about the 'pure notion' itself, the appropriate metaphor for which is number, and which Mallarmé elaborates with mathematical precision. This precision manifests itself, above all, in the care with which he sets up certain 'schemes of rupture' in the poem (*CS*, 120). These 'schemes' are the means by which the poem breaks free of all material and conventional ties, and finishes by being quite literally related to nothing. 'Prose' is the example par excellence of Mallarméan patience. It both involves and describes a slow, fastidious labour. This labour functions as a kind of clearing of the ground for the event, or an invocation of the event in its absence. Here Mallarmé struggles, above all, with 'the tenacious illusion (which is *doxa* itself) of the tie [lien], the relation, familiarity, resemblance, closeness' (*CS*, 129).

All three poems are methodical explorations of the conditions of the event. All three follow very different trajectories. The accounts of Mallarmé elsewhere in Badiou's work add more variations on the theme. According to the discussion of him in *L'Être et l'événement*, for example, Mallarmé thinks the drama of the event, both the *mise-en-scène* of its appearance and disappearance and the ensuing interpretation that fixes and preserves it.⁷¹ Poetry preserves a logic which, without its help, might have faded away unnoticed. Mallarmé's strength of purpose is precisely invested in this activity. Here he is concerned with what

⁷⁰ Stéphane Mallarmé, *Ceuvres*, ed. Yves-Alain Favre (Paris: Bordas, 1992), 81.

⁷¹ It is important to note that, here, Badiou writes of Mallarmé's interpretation of the event, rather than his involvement with what is, for Badiou, the much more commonly poetic question of naming it.

Badiou calls 'événementialité' or 'the event of the event' (*EE*, 218), a concept that will be very important to some of my commentary on Beckett, though Badiou himself never uses it in relation to his work. Mallarmé is even concerned with the event in its 'absolute' form, as an 'eternal' hesitation (*EE*, 215).

Badiou's involved account of 'L'Après-midi d'un faune' adds further nuances. For he reads that poem as establishing a dialectic between the event and modes of consciousness or signification that Mallarmé deems to be inappropriate to it. These include memory, which anaesthetizes the event, and narrative, which casts it into the form of a specific temporal logic. Indeed, Badiou actually suggests that the poem consistently calls the discourse of narrative into question. Only at the end of the poem is it clear that the faun is protected from such traps. This is because of a habit of methodical doubt which Badiou also associates with Descartes and Beckett, and which is emphatically not 'de type sceptique' (*PM*, 195). In his essay on Mallarmé and Labid ben Rabi'a, by contrast, Badiou rather focuses on *Un Coup de dés*, and, in particular, on the theme of the unmasterability of the event and truth. In *Coup de dés*, Mallarmé develops a seemingly paradoxical conception of choice as involving a surrender of power and self-containment. He does so because he thinks of truth as the regulated effect of an event. The event takes place outside all relation. This thought, however, is not philosophical, as Badiou makes clear in a long footnote on Lacoue-Labarthe's reading of Mallarmé.⁷² Lacoue-Labarthe makes what Plato knew to be the great mistake: he confuses thought with the 'thought of thought' (*CS*, 126–7 n. 20). He cannot see that poetry constitutes its own (singular and immanent) form of thought. He cannot see the case for an inaeesthetics.

Badiou recognizes, not only the complexity and sophistication of Mallarmé's poetics, but its extreme singularity. Mallarmé commits himself to a painstaking and scrupulous exploration of the site of the event, the circumstances and modes of its occurrence, the conditions which may enable or impede its consequences. By implication, there is an extraordinarily sustained and powerful will to negation lurking within Mallarméan *délicatesse*. But negation is not negativity: appalled, not only by the suppression of the Commune but also by the erasure of its traces, Mallarmé none the less does not become its memorialist. Turning in disgust from a culture complacently gorging on its own pieties, he writes those pieties off. But he also writes politics off, expressly turning towards 'a purely poetic duty' (*CD*, 22). He cultivates an art of severe and

⁷² In *Musica Ficta* (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1991).

rigorous meditation on the situation that makes possible truths like that of the Commune, and on the ontological determinations of such truths. The choice of Mallarmé over Rimbaud is anything but a simple issue. Indeed, says Badiou, at a revealing moment in the Rimbaud essay, who knows: it is Rimbaud one might want to choose tomorrow. But the general terms of the choice are clear. They are clear because Mallarmé's poetic practice is inseparable from an exquisitely demanding ethics. This ethics requires a host of careful, precise, and meticulous decisions in a way that Rimbaud's does not. Like, say, Cantor, who labours in solitude and in the face of protracted and vicious obloquy to transform a scientific tradition, Mallarmé should be counterposed to the proponents of a postmodern ethics; not, however, as an 'ethical hero', but as the subject of a truth. Mallarmé and Cantor have been seized by the progress of a truth, and are not its heroic agents. Rimbaud is also seized by a truth. The terms that it dictates, however, are ultimately not sufficient for him. The hater of Thermidoreans finally gives up on his desire.

Interestingly, however, Badiou ignores in Mallarmé what he will later find in Mandelstam and Celan. He remains obtuse to the trace and the timbre of Mallarméan melancholy; alternatively, he coarsens it into Mallarméan 'despair', to which he declares himself indifferent, as opposed to the 'affirmative capacity' of Mallarmé's thought, by which he is gripped.⁷³ Can the affirmative capacity in Mallarmé really be separated from the melancholy? If 'Ses purs ongles très haut' is about the ethical recognition of limits, the condition of that recognition is 'anguish', as Mallarmé says very clearly at the start of the poem.⁷⁴ Badiou's detailed analysis simply ignores the word. Perceptive though Badiou is about subtleties in Mallarmé, there are certain subtleties—dissonances, disjunctions, equivocations—to which he is unresponsive, certain cadences to which he is (sometimes obstinately) deaf. So too with Trakl: Badiou quotes Trakl—'Il y a une lumière que le vent a éteinte'—as designating the historical site of our thought, which seems plausible, yet at the same time appears to hear the line as toneless, as though there were no possibility that Trakl might be nuancing the designation in question.⁷⁵ In the same way, he can describe Mallarmé as 'the wintry poet [poète hivernal] par excellence', whilst intending it as a neutral observation on a poetic subjectivity that has freed itself from the object.⁷⁶

⁷³ See 'Saisissement, dessaisie, fidélité', 16. ⁷⁴ *Œuvres*, 69.

⁷⁵ 'L'Âge des poètes', 32. The quotation is the first line of Trakl's beautiful 'Psalm', 'Es ist ein Licht, das der Wind ausgelöscht hat'. Georg Trakl, *Gedichte* (Leipzig: Kurt Wolff Verlag, 1913), 49.

⁷⁶ 'L'Âge des poètes', 36.

The theme of Mallarmé's beautiful poem 'Petit Air' (on which Badiou does not comment) is certainly an event, the exultant plunge of the 'fugitive bird [fugace oiseau]'; or rather, it would be, if the poet could be certain that it had happened at all.⁷⁷ But he is not: there may have been nothing save the destitution that made the event seem possible, 'just any solitude | without swan or quay' ('quelconque une solitude | sans le cygne ou le quai'). This does not mean that the poem cannot be read in Badiou's terms. The bird will certainly 'never be heard again in life'. Its existence depends on the testimony of a subject, the poet himself, and on his response to what he must be sure he has seen and valued rightly. But once again, he is not sure. The end of the poem is emphatic, conditional, and aporetic together:

Le hagar musicien
Cela dans le doute expire
Si de mon sein pas du sien
A jailli le sanglot pire
Déchiré va-t-il entier
Rester sur quelque sentier!

The wild musician
That one dies in doubt
If from my breast not his
The worse sob sprang
He will stay torn
On some pathway!

Has the poet proved a faithful subject, or not? Or has the event 'died in doubt'? Mallarmé does not resolve the issue. The conditional mood, chopped phrasing, and disconnected, ambivalent logic leave us uncertain as to whether the poem is an affirmation of the chance occurrence or a plaintive account of a melancholy phantasm.

'Petit Air' not only thinks the possibility of the event strictly in relation to an inert context. It thinks the two as irreducibly linked. Mallarmé holds together a world enchanted by a truth and Rimbaud's disenchanted world. He suspends his poem between them, where Rimbaud decides in favour of the second and where Badiou himself is reluctant to recognize Mallarméan ambivalence. Badiou claims to articulate a logic that is intrinsic to Mallarmé's poems and available nowhere else. In some respects, he does this extremely

⁷⁷ The poem is in two parts. See *Œuvres*, 66–7.

well. But he also does it only insofar as he can make the logic at stake compatible with philosophical logic, insofar as he can make it logical (which also means sequential. Badiou tends to read poems in sequential terms, and to ignore anything in them that might resist or complicate sequence). In the end, for all his theoretical insistence on 'de-saturation', he treats Mallarmé too much as though he were a philosopher, and thereby diminishes the singularity of his poetry. In a poetry of pure thought or the 'pure notion', questions of affect, or, better, as I shall insist again later, of a thought that is also affect, can apparently simply be bracketed off. The problem is not only that, in Mallarmé's case, Badiou is committed to an unrelentingly affirmative vision of philosophy, and therefore indifferent to aspects of aesthetic experience that might point in a different direction. It is also that he himself has not pushed the principle of 'de-saturation' far enough, in a way that would allow him to see, not how art might contradict his thought, but how it might modulate it, temper it, lend it other intonations. As we shall increasingly see, the same can be said of his account of Beckett.

3

Badiou, Beckett, and Contemporary Criticism

SOME CRITICAL POSITIONS

Badiou's accounts of Beckett dispute the emphases of a whole critical tradition. This tradition has too often turned Beckett into an absurdist or existentialist, a nihilist or tragic pessimist. In doing so, it has effectively always contemplated Beckett as its own opposite, as the negative to the unrelenting positivity of its own discourse. In its very admiration of Beckett, the tradition has declared its distance from him. That distance is also the measure of its own worldliness. It has invariably adopted the point of view of the proprietor, for whom possessions are 'the sole proof of being and sense' (CS, 331). For Badiou, the great founding principle of philosophy is resistance to injustice, which is always resistance to the world as it is.¹ The tradition of Beckett criticism has been 'too appropriate [approprié]' to that world.² It has been able to understand Beckett only as inverting what it takes to be a self-evident plenitude (of which more later). From a philosophical perspective, however, that plenitude—of being and meaning—is no more self-evident than is the supposed 'poverty' of Beckett's art. What primarily commands the philosopher's attention, here, is not a condition of existential deprivation.³ It is the evidence of labour, unremitting effort, and, above all, thought: 'Beckett speaks to us', Badiou writes, with existentialist criticism in mind, of something 'much

¹ See 'D'un sujet enfin sans objet', *Après le sujet qui vient, Cahiers confrontation*, 20 (Winter 1989), 13–22, p. 16.

² *DP*, 22. The phrase is not applied to Beckett criticism. But it indicates how Badiou sees the three major tendencies of twentieth-century philosophy, the hermeneutic, the analytic, and the postmodern-deconstructive, and fits precisely into the context of the argument in this chapter as a whole.

³ It is worth noting in this context that Badiou points out that the characters in Beckett's plays never die. See *RT*, 133 n. 87.