

The Age of Poets

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THE AGE OF THE POETS

AND OTHER WRITINGS
ON TWENTIETH-CENTURY
POETRY AND PROSE

ALAIN BADIOU

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With an Introduction by
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VERSO
London • New York



This book is supported by the Institut français
as part of the Burgess programme
www.frenchbooknews.com

First published by Verso 2014
Translation © Bruno Bosteels 2014
Introduction © Emily Apter and Bruno Bosteels 2014
Parts of the introduction were previously published as
'Forcing the Truth' in Bruno Bosteels, *Badiou and Politics*
(Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011) and in Emily Apter,
'Laws of the '70s: Badiou's Revolutionary Untimeliness',
Cardozo Law Review 29.5 (April 2008)

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1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Verso

UK: 6 Meard Street, London W1F 0EG
US: 20 Jay Street, Suite 1010, Brooklyn, NY 11201
www.versobooks.com

Verso is the imprint of New Left Books

ISBN-13: 978-1-78168-569-3 (PB)
ISBN-13: 978-1-78168-570-9 (HB)
eISBN-13: 978-1-78168-571-6 (US)
eISBN-13: 978-1-78168-710-9 (UK)

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress

Typeset in Sabon by MJ & N Gavan, Truro, Cornwall

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Marston Book Services Ltd, Oxfordshire

INTRODUCTION

I

The texts collected in this volume correspond to Alain Badiou's work from the past fifty years on poetry and novelistic prose. Almost all of these texts – essays, prefaces, talks and reviews not yet included in previous books – are translated here for the first time. Some proved nearly impossible to locate, while others have yet to be published even in French. Taken together, they provide the reader with a broad vista onto a much underappreciated aspect of Badiou's oeuvre, which includes not only four novels of his own hand but also a relentless and longstanding engagement with modern literature that starts in 1965 with 'The Autonomy of the Aesthetic Process' and continues all the way to his most recent talk on 'Poetry and Communism' in the spring of 2014 at the Sorbonne.

Two great polemics run through these texts. The first and most recent polemic, which is the principal impetus behind the writings from the 1990s on the so-called 'age of the poets', takes aim at those ways of thinking of the link between poetry and philosophy that we can find in Martin Heidegger's writings as well as in the critical work from French readers of Heidegger's thinking such as the

late Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe. The second and much older polemic, hearkening back to the late 1960s, refers to the 'novelistic effect' in a critical rejoinder to the way in which literature is situated in relation to the epistemological break between science and ideology that we have come to associate with the canonical work of Louis Althusser, as well as that of disciples of his such as Pierre Macherey. Thus, in addition to providing the interested reader with a systematic account of Badiou's own take on the role of literature in and for philosophy, *The Age of the Poets and Other Writings on Twentieth-Century Poetry and Prose* also represents a theoretical settling of accounts with the mostly parallel yet similarly dominant strands of contemporary thought that are Heideggerianism and Althusserianism.

In both cases, moreover, the stakes are far from being limited to the age-old rivalry between philosophy and poetry – a jealous rivalry that was old already for the Ancients, as seen most notably and predictably in Plato's *Republic*. Rather, the uncomfortable rapport, or non-rapport, between poets and philosophers is at the same time rife with ideological tensions, hidden obstacles, and as-yet-unfulfilled promises. Philosophy and poetry, in other words, are secretly triangulated by politics. Thus, it is fitting that the first half of this collection should open with the title-essay 'The Age of the Poets', only to conclude, via Wallace Stevens and Pier Paolo Pasolini, with a return to the question of the essential link between poetry and communism in light of the unique internationalist experience of the civil war in Spain that brought together the likes of César Vallejo, Pablo Neruda, Paul Éluard and Nâzim Hikmet. Thus, also, if Nazism inevitably casts its long and ominous shadow over the polemic with Heidegger's readings of Friedrich Hölderlin or Georg Trakl, or with the same master's silent non-response to Paul Celan, by contrast, in the second part of this collection, the theoretical detour through Althusserian Marxism will be taken to task slowly but surely in order to raise anew the question of the egalitarian political destiny of narrative prose, following a

requiem for the old Marxism, among writers as diverse as Severo Sarduy, Natacha Michel and Pierre Guyotat.

Some thirty years ago, in *Peut-on penser la politique?*, Badiou already proposed a similar rule of thumb that is also applicable to *The Age of the Poets*: 'For those of us who, like me, accept that literature can name a real to which politics remains closed, there is room here to open a literary polemic.'¹ Speaking of what he would later come to name, borrowing an expression from Mallarmé's poetry, the 'obscure disaster' of the 'death' of Soviet communism, Badiou admits:

1 Alain Badiou, *Peut-on penser la politique?* (Paris: Seuil, 1985), p. 31. Badiou also briefly revisits the comparison between Solzhenitsyn and Shalamov in his *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward (London: Verso, 2002), pp. 11–12. A detailed account of Badiou's previously published readings of poetry and prose would have to include the following: the long analysis of Mallarmé's poetry as an instance of the structural dialectic, in *Theory of the Subject*, trans. Bruno Bosteels (London: Continuum, 2009), pp. 51–110; the meditations on Mallarmé and Hölderlin in *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (London: Continuum 2005), pp. 191–8, 255–61; *On Beckett*, trans. Alberto Toscano and Nina Power (London: Clinamen, 2003); Chapters 4–6 in *Conditions*, trans. Steven Corcoran (London: Continuum, 2008), pp. 35–90; most of *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, trans. Alberto Toscano (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004); the readings of Saint-John Perse, Paul Celan, Fernando Pessoa, Bertolt Brecht, Osip Mandelstam and others scattered throughout *The Century*, trans. Alberto Toscano (London: Polity, 2007); the sections on Paul Valéry and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's treatment of love in *The New Heloise*, in *Logics of Worlds*, trans. Alberto Toscano (London: Continuum, 2009), pp. 367–9, 455–9. And, of course, Badiou's ongoing Wednesday seminars rarely fail to invoke the poets and novelists of our time, especially in the recently published *Images du temps présent, 2001–2004*, which is part of Badiou, *Le Séminaire* (Paris: Fayard, 2014). For a critical analysis of some of the operations and shortcomings in Badiou's take on literature, see the essays by Pierre Macherey, Gabriel Riera and Jean-Michel Rabaté in *Alain Badiou: Philosophy and Its Conditions* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2005), pp. 61–115; Jean-Jacques Lecercle, *Badiou and Deleuze Read Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012); Quentin Meillassoux, 'Badiou et Mallarmé: l'événement et le peut-être', in *Autour d'Alain Badiou*, ed. Isabelle Vodoz and Fabien Tarby (Paris: Germina, 2011), pp. 103–25; and Jacques Rancière, 'The Poet at the Philosopher's: Mallarmé and Badiou', in *The Politics of Literature* (London: Polity, 2011), pp. 183–203.

Subjectively, it is well known that it is in the prophetic resource of art that the Russian horror has finally managed to come to light for the Western conscience. The simple stating of the facts by Victor Serge, David Rousset, and many others, did not suffice for this. Only the genius of Alexander Solzhenitsyn has completely shaken the regime of blind certitudes.²

However, promptly proceeding to contrast the Christic, nationalistic and staunchly antidemocratic ideology of *The Gulag Archipelago* with the ethical simplicity of a few principles and the universality of an unshaken will in Varlam Shalamov's short stories collected in *Kolyma: Stories of Life in the Camps*, Badiou warns against the naive glorification of literary evidence in and of itself: 'We should not pick the wrong writer, when it is art that governs the possibility of political thought. No matter how great Solzhenitsyn is, his grandeur mirrors the dark grandeur in which Stalin consummated the red disaster.'³ A genuine assessment of the disastrous failures and no less disastrous defeats of twentieth-century communism is still before us. Shalamov's prose, like Brecht's poetry, can help us understand the enormous scale of this task, which requires nothing less than the complete reinvention of a new time for politics, without nostalgia or renegacy: 'All of *Kolyma*, in the very name of the victims, calls for them not to settle for political innocence. It is this non-innocence that must be invented, elsewhere than in pure reaction. To end with the horror demands the advancement of a politics that integrates that which its absence has cost.'⁴

2

As for the polemic with Heidegger, this should not be misunderstood as if to suggest that the age of the poets were

2 Badiou, *Peut-on penser la politique?*, pp. 30–1.

3 Ibid., p. 34.

4 Ibid., p. 39.

merely an invention of the thinker from Todtnauberg. Such an era or historic moment in the development of modern poetry did actually take place long before the essays on Hölderlin, Rilke or Trakl were published in Heidegger's *Poetry, Language, Thought* or *On the Way to Language*. As Badiou writes in *Manifesto for Philosophy*: 'The fact is that there really was an age of the poets, in the time of the sutured escheat of philosophy.'⁵ Heidegger only succeeded in giving this historic moment the quasi-sacred aura of an ontological destiny: 'The existence of the poets gave to Heidegger's thinking, something without which it would have been aporetic and hopeless, a ground of historicity, actuality, apt to confer upon it – once the mirage of a political historicity had been concretized and dissolved in the Nazi horror – what was to be its unique, real occurrence.'⁶

Badiou certainly admits the greatness of Heidegger's thinking. He opens *Being and Event* by referring to the author of *Being and Time* as 'the last universally recognizable philosopher'.⁷ Heidegger is greeted as the one responsible for raising again the quintessential philosophical question of being qua being: 'Our epoch can be said to have been stamped and signed, in philosophy, by the return of the question of being. This is why it is dominated by Heidegger.'⁸ In Heidegger's interpretations of poetry, therefore, it is not the ontological question as such that is the issue of polemics, but rather the particular – poeticizing – orientation thereof, summarized in the prophetic answer to the question: 'What are poets for in times of distress?' In fact, Badiou's own philosophy of the event is inaugurated by a refusal to pursue the themes of the end or the times of distress according to the hermeneutico-historical path that takes its inspiration from Heidegger's thinking about poetry.

5 Alain Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy*, trans. Norman Madarasz (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999), p. 70 (translation modified).

6 Ibid., p. 74.

7 Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 1.

8 Alain Badiou, *Deleuze: The Clamor of Being*, trans. Louise Burchill (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p. 19.

This refusal, together with the accompanying search for an alternative ontological orientation – that is, the clearing of a path away from poetry and towards mathematics – really constitutes the first founding gesture of Badiou's renewed Platonism. On one hand, the aim is to substitute an axiomatic ontology of subtraction for the hermeneutic ontology of presence and the retreat of presence, or of the enigma and unconcealment of meaning or sense; on the other hand, the project consists in interrupting, through a consistent pursuit of the matheme, the suture of philosophy onto the poem, by taking one further step in the unfolding of the intrinsic power of each of the four generic procedures of truth that are science, politics, art and love.

Suture, in Badiou's philosophy, has at least two different meanings, neither of which should be confused with how Jacques-Alain Miller in his early days defined the concept in classic texts written for the Lacano-Althusserian journal *Cahiers pour l'analyse*, a definition that was subsequently popularized both in the direction of film theory, around the journal *Screen*, and in the political theory of figures such as the late Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, above all in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. For Badiou, suture in the first place describes the way in which the discourse of ontology, as the science of being qua being, is linked onto being through the void. This is how the concept appears in *Being and Event*: 'I term *void* of a situation this suture to its being.'⁹ From within a given situation, we can think of the sheer multiplicity of being only through the void of this situation. Suture thus has a first, productive meaning in *Being and Event*, as that which enables the discourse of ontology. But this meta-ontological use of the concept has almost nothing to do with the second meaning of suture, advanced in *Manifesto of Philosophy* to describe the way in which modern philosophy, particularly after Hegel, has tended to abdicate and delegate its own powers of thought to just one of its four conditions – first to science, with positivism, and then to politics, with revolutionary Marxism.

9 Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 55.

Marxism, in fact, combines both sutures in the claim to ground revolutionary politics in the science of History. The age of the poets, then, intervenes in this process by remitting the task of philosophy, or of post-metaphysical thinking, to the speech of the poets as a way to stay clear of both the scientific positivity of the object and the political sense or meaning of History: 'In thrall in the West to science, in the East to politics, philosophy has attempted in western Europe at least to serve the other Master, the poem. Philosophy's current situation is that of a harlequin serving three masters.'¹⁰

The treatment of the poetico-hermeneutic tradition in *Being and Event* and *Manifesto for Philosophy*, which is continued in the texts on the age of the poets in this volume, can nonetheless lead to a number of misunderstandings. It presumes, first of all, that one accepts the description, which is supposed to be consensual, of hermeneutics (here used as a name for Heidegger's legacy) as a thinking of near-sacred presence. This description, however, is extremely surprising insofar as it hides the extent to which hermeneutic ontology, too, claims to be a thinking of the event. If we simply accept Badiou's opposition between subtraction and presence, it thus becomes extremely difficult to grasp in what sense the event of being, in the Heideggerian legacy, serves precisely to deconstruct rather than restore and resacralize the metaphysics of presence. This potential debate is obscured not only because hermeneutic thinking is voided of its event-like potential, but also – and this is the second reason why there might be a misunderstanding involved – because the ontology of presence is identified exclusively with the operation that sutures philosophy to the poem. 'What we must recall from Heidegger', Badiou writes, 'is the idea that, in times of distress, thought is foremost on the way to speech',¹¹ so that the only possible answer to

10 Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy*, p. 67 (translation modified).

11 Alain Badiou, *Briefings on Existence: A Short Treatise on Transitory Ontology*, trans. Norman Madarasz (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2006), p. 108.

the hermeneutic tradition necessarily passes through a de-suturing of philosophy from the poem: 'For this reason, the fundamental criticism of Heidegger can only be the following one: the age of the poets is finished; it is necessary *also* to de-suture philosophy from its poetic condition.'¹²

This partial and potentially misleading reading of hermeneutic ontology explains why, in the wake of the publication of *Being and Event* and *Manifesto for Philosophy*, the debate with the Heideggerian tradition became fixated on the question of the 'age of the poets', as in this collection's title essay, which was first presented as a talk for the seminar organized by Jacques Rancière on *The Politics of Poets: What are Poets for in Times of Distress?*¹³ Witness, for example, the few public exchanges that took place, sometimes hidden away in a footnote, with Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe. The latter summarizes the debate, or rather reopens it, by stating that the problem cannot be reduced to a suturing of philosophy to the poem, since the true question at issue is rather some kind of political re-suturing of the artistic suture – that is, the aestheticization of politics of which Walter Benjamin had already spoken: 'There is, if you want, some kind of misunderstanding, which bears on poetry, for sure, but also on politics – or at the very least on a determinate type of politics, even a style, to which the philosophy from which Badiou seeks to demarcate himself is not foreign.'¹⁴ At the same time, Lacoue-Labarthe's answer puts into question the link between art, philosophy and politics from the point of view not so much of the poem, but of what he calls the mytheme, in the sense of an immanent putting-to-work of the collective. Of

12 Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy*, p. 74 (translation modified).

13 Alain Badiou, 'L'Âge des poètes', in Jacques Rancière, ed., *La politique des poètes: Pourquoi des poètes en temps de détresse?* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1992), pp. 21–38.

14 Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, 'Poésie, philosophie, politique', in Rancière, *La politique des poètes*, p. 47. See also Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Heidegger and the Politics of Poetry*, ed. and trans. Jeff Fort (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2007).

such mythic or fictive putting-to-work or self-fashioning we all know only too well the disastrous consequences in what Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, in *The Nazi Myth*, call 'national-aestheticism'.¹⁵ To this disastrous outcome, the same authors claim, we can then barely begin to oppose, on one hand, the idea of a becoming-prose of poetry – that is, the interruption of myth – and, on the other, the retreat of the political, which is at once a new treatment of that which withdraws, or of that which never took place to begin with – for instance, the idea of sovereignty – as the condition both of the possibility and the radical impossibility of politics as such.

By contrast, as far as the clear ontological alternative is concerned between the paths of presence and subtraction, or, in terms of the conditions of philosophy, between the poem and the matheme, these decisions, which are absolutely fundamental to Badiou's philosophy, seem to carry no weight at all in the eyes of someone like Nancy, who is otherwise ideally placed to judge the questions of art and the event according to Heidegger. In his beautiful book *The Sense of the World*, for instance, Nancy comes to a point where he is able to find in Badiou's mathematical ontology of subtraction what he considers to be 'certain formulations that are strictly equivalent to those to which a deconstruction of onto-theology leads', with the difference between the two paths being reduced, by way of 'a carefully arranged lexical transcription', to a mere question of styles or modes, whether 'a more pathos-laden mode (Heidegger) or in a cooler mode (Badiou)'.¹⁶ Despite

15 Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *Le mythe nazi* (La Tour d'Aigues: Éditions de l'Aube, 1991), available in English as 'The Nazi Myth', trans. Brian Holmes, *Critical Inquiry* 16 (Winter 1990), pp. 291–312.

16 Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, trans. Jeffrey S. Librett (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 175 n. 19. As Nancy explains with regard to the subject who decides in the face of the event, according to Badiou, 'One is, at bottom, on a Heideggerian register, that of "*Das Ereignis trägt die Wahrheit = die Wahrheit durchragt das Ereignis*" (the event carries truth = truths juts out through the event), where the verb *durchragen* would call for a long gloss. It is "jutting across", and

Badiou's affirmation of a trenchant rupture, some of the subtlest readers of the ontology of presence, in turning to this author, thus find nothing if not one more endeavour in the general deconstruction of metaphysics.

With regard to Heidegger, in other words, it is a matter not so much of defining a thought of the event in opposition to the oblique approach of presence as of opposing two clearly distinct ideas – or two different orientations – of the event itself. Furthermore, the space for this harsh and often hushed polemic cannot be reduced to the problems relative to the age of the poets, during which philosophy – in its Heideggerian closure and repetition – ends up sutured to the enigma of being proffered by the poetic word. To the contrary, the polemic extends to other conditions as well. Thus, an updated confrontation with the Heideggerian path of deconstruction should also bear on the efforts to delimit what the condition of politics, or of the political, holds for us today, after the critique both of its immanent presentation by the people, masses or multitude and of its external representation by the machinery of the state. In this regard, a discussion of the collective project surrounding the seminars *Rejouer le politique* and *Le retrait du politique* (partially translated as *Retreating the Political*), organized at the Centre for the Philosophical Study of the Political at the École Normale Supérieure in rue d'Ulm in the early 1980s by Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe – a project in which Badiou participated with the two conferences that were later published in *Peut-on penser la politique?* – would lead to a wholly different outlook, irreducible to the opposition between poem and matheme, or between presence and subtraction, in order to serve up an answer to the deconstruction of metaphysics in the footsteps of Heidegger and Derrida.¹⁷

thus also “piercing” and almost “tearing” (“incising” in Badiou’s vocabulary). Any thought that privileges truth, that takes on *the style of truth*, dedicates itself to the tension of an internal tornness, whether it does so in a more pathos-laden mode (Heidegger) or in a cooler mode (Badiou)’ (ibid.).

17 See the two collections of papers produced during the seminar

'It is only possible to think the singularity of a thought by *evacuating time*', proposes Badiou in *Metapolitics*, paraphrasing Sylvain Lazarus's argument in his 1996 book *Anthropology of the Name*.¹⁸ Why must time be evacuated? In order, it would seem, for the singularity of 'the possible' to be inserted as a caesura into the sequence of political time. This is not a caesura featured as openness or clearing, but as actualization of the generic multiple; as subtraction of event from situation, or as escape from the regime of the one. 'What name can thinking give to its own immemorial attempt to subtract being from the grip of the one?' Badiou asks in his essay 'The Question of Being Today', which discusses Heidegger. Too many thinkers exceed the framework of the destiny of Western metaphysics for Heidegger's philosophical apparatus to be the only path to follow, according to Badiou.

Can we learn to mobilize those figures who so obviously exempt themselves from Heidegger's destinal apparatus? Figures such as the magnificent Lucretius, in whom the power of the poem, far from maintaining the Open in the midst of epochal distress, tries instead to subtract thinking from every return of the gods and firmly establish it within the certitude of the multiple?¹⁹

The naming of the possible prescription, if one extrapolates here, has everything to do with the possibility of

on the political organized at the École Normale Supérieure by Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy: *Rejouer le politique* (Paris: Galilée, 1981) and *Le retrait du politique* (Paris: Galilée, 1983); in English, a selection can be found in *Retreating the Political*, ed. and trans. Simon Sparks (New York: Routledge, 1997).

18 Alain Badiou, *Metapolitics*, trans. Jason Barker (London: Verso, 2005), p. 33. See also Sylvain Lazarus, *Anthropologie du nom* (Paris: Seuil, 1996).

19 Alain Badiou, 'The Question of Being Today', in *Theoretical Writings*, ed. and trans. Ray Brassier and Alberto Toscano (London: Continuum, 2006), p. 43.

bringing a truth or prescription into existence, of making it happen in political time. This idea of the name of the event as a subtracted 'possible' or 'thinkability' is what allows political time to be re-sequenced. For Badiou, this rarely happens without recourse to the immanent capacities not just of the language of poetry but of the novel's narrative prose as well.

The Century already actively enlists poetry to re-time the political. Badiou tries to imagine how the twentieth century would articulate its movement in its own language, subjectivizing itself as century-think. Two poems allow us to hear the century 'speak', so to speak. The first poem is by Saint-John Perse, a privileged turn-of-the-century Francophone diplomat from Guadeloupe; the second by Paul Celan, a Romanian-born polyglot Heideggerian Jewish translator who survived a labour camp during World War II and committed suicide in 1967. 'Anabasis' is their common title – a trope signifying an errant path, an unedited return or *égarement*. For Badiou, anabasis becomes the name for a 'small century' interrupted on the eve of May '68 – a poetic span leading from Perse's 'fraternal axiom' (the 'I' which becomes 'we' in the voyage out, the sacrifice of identitarian security) to Celan's 'ensemble' or 'together' (the set of 'we' that escapes 'I', the spectre haunting the 1970s in the form of a group subject, a set or category excluded from its own terms). This timing of anabasis is a suspended revolutionary temporality, a mini-century in need of subtraction from the global period of Restoration that began in the 1980s, themselves timed according to competitive individualism and the regime of profit.

Against the long century of so-called totalitarianism, poetry thus contributes to what we might name another fractional time-signature – Badiou's short or mini-century that threatens to be eclipsed by the Heideggerian appropriation of the age of the poets: a temporality that is *of* the 1970s insofar as it coincides with Badiou's Maoist turn, and his rejection, from then on, of all systems of 'capitalo-parliamentarianism' that represent themselves through

‘the subjective law of “democracy”’.²⁰ The Badiou century reopens the revolutionary sequence of the Commune or group subject and is identifiable with a heightened sense of time itself. The spaces and sensations of time that collect around iconic dates are compressed, accelerated, and rendered trans-historical. As Dominique Lecourt puts it, writing about May ’68 in France, ‘In our theoretical rear-view mirror we saw 1936, 1871, 1848 and 1793 march past in speeded-up motion. We rediscovered France, “classical country of the class struggle”, as the old Marx had written. Some doctrinaires were predicting the Commune for the end of June!’²¹ Badiou’s century, shaped by the writers with whom he shared literary and activist trajectories (Natacha Michel, Pierre Guyotat, Henry Bauchau, the ‘Red Hawks’ Guy Lardreau and Christian Jambet), is marked by Althusserianism, Maoism, anti-imperialism, *Anti-Oedipus*, worker strikes, new social movements, sexual liberation, and the initial organizing of *les sans-papiers* and *les sans-abri*. This century continues in the refusal to surrender to post-Berlin Wall ideologies of capitalist triumphalism and neoliberal consensus, and in what we might call Badiou’s ‘post-Maoism’ – an uncompleted political sequence that exceeds the period normally assigned to French Maoism, the so-called ‘red years’ of 1966–76.²²

20 Badiou, quoted in Peter Hallward, *Badiou: A Subject to Truth* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), p. 45.

21 Dominique Lecourt, *The Mediocracy: French Philosophy since 1968*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2001), p. 28.

22 Badiou’s main texts from this period are *Théorie de la contradiction* (Paris: François Maspero, 1975); *De l’idéologie* (Paris: François Maspero, 1976); and *Le noyau rationnel de la dialectique hégélienne* (Paris: François Maspero, 1977). These texts have recently been reissued in French under the title *Les années rouges* (Paris: Les Prairies Ordinaires, 2012). For a more detailed account of Badiou’s post-Maoism, see Chapters 3 and 4 in Bruno Bosteels, *Badiou and Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press).

In the earliest stages of this Maoist sequence, long before he would engage in polemical struggles with the Heideggerian legacy over the age of the poets, Badiou began his career as a philosopher by tackling the theory of science and ideology of his mentor Althusser from the point of view of literary art. Thus, after achieving considerable critical acclaim with *Almagestes* (1964) and *Portulans* (1967), two avant-garde novels or anti-novels that promptly drew praise from Sartre, Badiou's first publication was 'The Autonomy of the Aesthetic Process'.²³ Completed in June 1965 as part of a seminar presented under the aegis of Althusser and published the following year in a special issue of the *Cahiers Marxist-Léninistes* on 'Art, Language, and Class Struggle', edited by members of the Union des Jeunesses Communistes (Marxiste-Léniniste) at the École Normale Supérieure in rue d'Ulm, the essay also shows Badiou taking his distance from the discussions about art and ideology as they were taking shape at the time – that is, in the immediate wake of the 1965 publication of *For Marx* and *Reading Capital*, most notably in an essay from the same year by Pierre Macherey devoted to Lenin's famous literary criticism on Leo Tolstoy.

Anticipating what would soon become his core proposal in *A Theory of Literary Production*, Macherey follows Althusser in arguing for art and literature's special status in comparison to other ideological forms. While clearly unable to produce the kind of knowledge associated with science, art also cannot be equated with the purely imaginary effects of ideology. Macherey and Althusser 'solve' this enigma of the specific difference of artistic production by positing *within* art a relation of internal distancing, or redoubling, with regard to its own ideological nature.

In his 1966 'Letter on Art in Reply to André Daspre', for instance, Althusser tries to answer the question of whether

23 Alain Badiou, 'L'autonomie du processus esthétique', *Cahiers Marxist-Léninistes* 12–13 (1966), pp. 77–89.