

neighbors killed neighbors (and here, read “Poles killed Jews”) is to take far too liberal an historical license. But in this case what matters isn’t rethinking the history of the massacre in Jedwabne—historians will do their work, cooler heads will prevail, and sooner or later we’ll have the information we need in order to say with some certainty what happened. What matters is why Gross’s representation of the events stirred such vehemence among non-Jewish Poles nearly sixty years after the events.

Moving from testimonies and documents—which Bauer admits are variously interpretable—to the writing of history is always dicey, and is always subject to revision, reconsideration, and, eventually, better (if not more “accurate”) historical accounts. But the work of reconsidering that evidence and the story built to hold it together always involves accounting for the resonance history has upon the present. Like memory, in which the past makes itself evident in the present but which is only available as a commingling of past and present, history involves reckoning with the present. It involves not just mentioning one’s biases up front (as Bauer does) but patiently factoring them into the historical soup. This work is being done in admirable ways in the United States by people like Dominick LaCapra, Peter Novick, Alan Berger and Berel Lang, among others. As Bauer suggested at Yad Vashem three years ago, and as he tells us in *Rethinking the Holocaust*, he is well aware that the only way to resist closing the book on the Shoah and filing it away into cultural memory so it doesn’t bother us any more is to continually put pressure on the categories that we use to keep it at arm’s length. But because Bauer seems unable to consider the often traumatic effects of the Holocaust on members of the three generations born since the events, he can only rethink the Holocaust as history, even as its presence as fact troubles us today.

Michael Bernard-Donals
University of Wisconsin, Madison



Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil by Alain Badiou. Translated by Peter Hallward. London and New York: Verso, 2001. Pp. 166. \$23.00 cloth.

The publication in English of Alain Badiou’s *Ethics* (originally published in French in 1998) may come to constitute an “event” in just the sense that Badiou gives to the concept in his own work: a break with the received ideas of a given context. As Badiou himself makes clear in the “Preface to the English Edition,” his *Ethics* is mobilized by two, not always consistent desires: this slim volume is at once a critique of the taken for granted ethical culture of the contemporary political and intellectual order and the articulation of a radically different perspective on “Good and Evil.” On the one hand, Badiou has used the

opportunity of an invitation to write a primer on ethics in order to express his “genuine fury” at the “moral terrorism” of the discourse of human rights and the new US-directed, “humanitarian” interventionism that it buttresses (liii). On the other hand, he seeks to develop the practical and ethical consequences of his philosophical system, which he set out in 1988 in his massive and complex work *L’Etre et l’événement* (*Being and Event*—currently under translation). Badiou’s political critique of the moralization of politics in the post–Cold War era is an important one, and has been echoed by Slavoj Žižek and others. It becomes more interesting and original, however, when read from the perspective of his philosophical engagement with discourses of ethics in postwar thought.

Badiou is probably the most famous French philosopher not to have a major following in the Anglo-American academy—although this situation is surely in the process of changing, with several translations recently published or in the works and with Badiou receiving accolades from Žižek, one of the great contemporary mediators of French theory. Badiou’s relative anonymity in the English-speaking world probably results in part from the difficulty of his thought—which draws heavily on mathematics (especially set theory) as well as Lacanian psychoanalysis and Althusserian marxism—and in part from his distinctly un-American political profile as an ex-Maoist and unrepentant radical militant. For those unfamiliar with Badiou’s work, *Ethics* makes an excellent starting point. First, the volume is quite accessible, since, as Badiou remarks, it was originally written for “a series aimed at secondary-school and university students” (liii)—although I suspect that the less philosophically-oriented American student would probably still have difficulty with it until the advanced undergraduate level. Second, the book is ably translated by Peter Hallward, who also provides a clear introduction that situates the argument in more familiar theoretical terrain, with references to the ethics of Derrida and Spivak. Hallward also includes a 1997 interview he conducted with Badiou that is fascinating both for the biographical and political contextualization it supplies and for the further hints it contains of Badiou’s unusual philosophical system.

Badiou’s primary philosophical adversary in his *Ethics* is Emmanuel Lévinas, the Lithuanian-born, French-Jewish philosopher known especially for his ethics of otherness and his influence on certain versions of poststructuralism. Badiou’s critique of Lévinas in this brief text will probably seem superficial to adherents of the latter’s thought. Indeed, it seems that Badiou is less interested in Lévinas as such than in the general influence he has had on political and theoretical discourses: Lévinas stands in for the contemporary valorization of otherness, difference, and victimization as the grounds and stakes of ethics. In one of Lévinas’s most famous formulations, he writes, “To see a face is already to hear ‘You shall not kill,’ and to hear ‘You shall not kill’ is to hear ‘Social

justice'” (*Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, trans. Sean Hand [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990], 8). For Badiou, in contrast, the obsession with human beings' potential for victimization is a form of nihilism, since the “underlying conviction [of this ethics] is that the only thing that can really happen to someone is death” (35). Such a nihilistic perspective will not lead toward “social justice,” but rather toward apology for actually existing relations of exploitation and domination.

In a further move—which Hallward correctly diagnoses as Badiou's most provocative point from the perspective of contemporary doxa—Badiou dismisses outright the very interest of discussions of otherness and difference. It would not be quite right to say that Badiou is hostile to the aims of the politics of difference, a perspective often associated with the concept of multiculturalism; rather, he takes cultural and other forms of difference for granted and demands that we move beyond them if we want to be truly ethical. He writes,

genuine thought should affirm the following principle: since differences are what there is, and since every truth is the coming-to-be of that which is not yet, so differences are then precisely what truths depose, or render insignificant. No light is shed on any concrete situation by the notion of the ‘recognition of the other.’ Every modern collective configuration involves people from everywhere, who have their different ways of eating and speaking, who wear different sorts of headgear, follow different religions, have complex and varied relations to sexuality, prefer authority or disorder, and such is the way of the world. (27)

As these rather sarcastic remarks about cultural difference illustrate, Badiou strips otherness of any ethical salience and replaces it with a somewhat idiosyncratic notion of truth. I will return to this question of cultural difference, but for the moment it is important to understand what Badiou means when he opposes the problem of difference to the question of truth.

A truth is, for Badiou, “*indifferent to differences*”; it is “*the same for all*” (27; AB's italics). How can we situate such a claim in the contemporary theoretical landscape? Is Badiou's ethics simply a return to the totalizing and universalizing thought that a combination of historical and intellectual events (the Holocaust, Stalinism, colonialism, postmodernism, etc.) had seemed to render hopelessly passé? While Badiou's understanding of truth, and thus also ethics, is uncompromisingly universalizing, it is also definitively not totalizing. The interest of his thought today lies precisely in the way he finesses this apparent paradox.

When Badiou writes that truth is “the same for all” he does not mean that there is only one truth. To the contrary, truths are irreducibly plural. They are the product of “the real process of fidelity to an event” (42), and there are an

infinite number of possible events. Events—to continue using Badiou’s vocabulary—are immanent breaks with a given situation. And a situation is a singular configuration, an “infinite multiple” which can be “politico-historical,” “strictly physical or material,” aesthetic, or even defined by the relationship of two people (129). As the four-fold definition of potential situations implies, Badiou sees the possibility of truth in the fields of politics, science, art, and love (this last “field” being one of the most surprising and suggestive in this self-proclaimed “anti-humanist” thinker). Within a given situation there are always a number of “instituted knowledges”—that is, everyday forms of understanding that Badiou characterizes as “opinions” (cf. 43, 50–1). These knowledges trace a series of relationships within the situation which can never be universal (i.e. never attain the level of truth) and which always serve the given order or power.

Because knowledge serves power (and this is not precisely Badiou’s own language), there will always be “voids” in a given situation that cannot be known or thought according to the recognized forms of knowledge. Badiou links this notion of the unthought in a given reality to Lacan’s notion of the Real. (One also thinks of the Sartre of *Search for a Method*.) But there is also a significant difference between Badiou’s void and Lacan’s Real: while the Real is never susceptible to transformation (it is the place to which one always returns), the void can be revealed and thus potentially displaced through the advent of an event (although it is never clear from where the event emerges—Badiou likens its advent to a non-theological “grace” [122–3]). An event—whether it involves the production of art, political action, scientific discovery, or an amorous encounter—reveals what was missing in the given state of the situation. Once the event has taken place, producing truth entails remaining “faithful” to the event that has revealed the gaps in the situation. The production of truth also constitutes a subject (which, for Badiou, is more an assemblage than an individual), and helps to re-make the opinions and instituted knowledges of the situation—it is thus fundamentally a form of permanent, if local, revolution.

How does Badiou move from his notion of truth-processes to the question of ethics and what he calls the “ethic of truths” [*l’éthique des vérités*]? In a reversal of what he sees as the contemporary ideology of ethics, Badiou supposes that good must be posited as coming before evil. The regime of human rights sees good primarily as a response to an already existing evil; hence, it remains reactive. Badiou, on the other hand, equates good with the production of universal truths and argues that evil emerges through the failure of truth-processes to live up to their universalizing mission. That is, evil emerges either when a truth is not the same for all, when fidelity to the event is not maintained, or when the truth that has been produced is substituted for the totality

of the social field. Positing evil as a derailed truth process is helpful in understanding one of the key questions of the twentieth century—how can ordinary people commit extraordinary acts of evil?—because it demonstrates evil's proximity to progressive and potentially liberating human projects. Evil is thus not easily ghettoized as the other of reason or humanism.

Because of the three possible sources of evil's emergence, evil is seen as belonging to one of three genres: it appears as terror, as betrayal, or as disaster. Terror involves the attempt to produce a truth that does not hold for all. Nazism falls into this category insofar as it constructs an exclusionary imaginary community, but so would various other communitarian, nationalist, and racist projects. (Here, Badiou seems close to Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy's notion of the "Nazi myth," which is characterized by a "will to difference, to distinction, to individuation.") (See Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *Le mythe nazi* [La Tour d-Aigues: Editions de l'Aube, 1991], 62; my translation.) When a subject does not remain faithful to a truth-process, the second form of evil, betrayal, results. In scenarios of betrayal, "former revolutionaries are obliged to declare that they used to be lost in error and madness," "a former lover no longer understands why he loved that woman," or "a tired scientist comes to misunderstand, and to frustrate through bureaucratic routine, the very development of his own science" (79–90). Disaster, on the other hand, follows from the too rigorous application of a truth, the "absolutization of its power" such that it comes to wipe out entirely the everyday knowledges of the situation and the "human animal" that constitutes "truth's very foundation" (84–5).

In what ways are Badiou's ethical categories useful? What are the limits of the ethics he articulates? The distinctions between terror, betrayal, and disaster do help us to differentiate between some of the different forms that historical evil has taken in recent times. For example, if Nazism seems to represent the extreme form of terror, Stalinism and the Cultural Revolution might be the extreme forms of the disaster: the pursuit of a truth that is, unlike the racist's truth, addressed to all, and yet which, by virtue of its totalizing application, wipes out the lifeworlds of its addressees. At the same time, if Nazism and more run-of-the-mill forms of nationalism are equally examples of terror, what happens to historical particularity and the scale of ethical judgment? Are betrayal of an amorous encounter, an aesthetic project, a political revolution, and a scientific insight really comparable in ethical or any other terms? While Badiou performs an important service in revealing the underlying structure of forms of evil, his categories risk running together practices of radically different sorts. Furthermore, who is to judge whether a particular event is addressed to all? Is the universal addressee a given or must it also be constructed like the subject of truth?

Another sort of problem emerges when we consider Badiou's attempt to

surpass the discourse of victimization that he and many others see as defining the contemporary moment. While this critique of victim-centered ethics is crucial, and works well with respect to many situations, it risks overgeneralization. In his laudable insistence that humanity “*does not coincide with the identity of the victim*” (11; emphasis in original), Badiou leaves out of his system the possibility that a human being could be *reduced* precisely to the status of victim. Such a case has been investigated by the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben in *Remnants of Auschwitz* under the heading of the “*Muselmann*.” *Muselmann*, or “Muslim,” was the name given in certain Nazi camps to prisoners who had been so overcome by hunger, beatings, etc. that they became zombie-like, incapable of human communication or response, trapped in an indeterminate zone between life and death. While surely the product of an extremity not conducive to generalization, the *Muselmann* nevertheless constitutes the unthought of Badiou’s own project: the potential of a victimization so radical that it really does exceed the possibility of any human project or truth-process. Whether this case is at all conducive to ethical or political elaboration must remain open here, but what the counter-example of the *Muselmann* suggests is the limit of Badiou’s will to universality.

The problem with universality surely also returns in the insistence on ignoring questions of cultural difference. Badiou’s absolute commitment to the ethical value of the Same—the fact that truths are addressed equally to all—demonstrates a provocative and radically democratic spirit. In presenting truths as simultaneously multiple and universal, Badiou poses an imaginative answer to what may be the most intractable antinomy of contemporary left social theory: the difficulty of adjudicating claims for universality and particularity. (For other attempts to think through this problem, see the contributions to the recent collective volume by Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* [London and New York: Verso, 2000]. And yet, is his notion that the universality of truths is premised on the simultaneous local nature of truth—its immanence to a particular situation with which it breaks—sufficient to ward off fears of homogenization, if not cultural imperialism? How can we differentiate between the Sameness of truth and the homogenization produced by capitalist commodification? Is there an alternative formulation that would respect the universal address of truths while still allowing for a valorization of or commitment to difference? The unease that Badiou’s dismissal of cultural difference provokes, despite the freshness of his formulation, suggests that the antinomy of the universal and the particular is as much a symptom of the post–Cold War historical moment as a problem solvable in theory.

In addition, given the intractability of the problem, Badiou’s insistence on the universality (and even “immortality”) of truths seems not just a political

response to neo-liberalism and its ideology of human rights and cultural difference, but also a move in a game of academic identity politics. In other words, the philosopher's positing of the existence of universality can also be read as an intra-academic response to disciplines (and interdisciplines) that have been associated with claims to difference, such as literary studies, anthropology, and ethnic, cultural, and women's studies. Such an observation is not meant to detract from the argument, but rather to demonstrate how it works on multiple levels: it is at once a rejection of the politics (or rather anti-politics) of the global order; a rejoinder to the domination of the ethics of alterity in recent philosophy; and a provocation aimed at literary and cultural critics who instinctively and reactively value difference. It is unlikely that readers will agree with Badiou on all of these counts, yet his *Ethics* remains an intervention that deserves a response. After Badiou, those of us committed to a politics of difference will need to think difference differently.

Michael Rothberg

University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign



Chaos Theory and James Joyce's Everyman by Peter Francis Mackey. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1999. Pp. xiv + 234. \$49.95 cloth.

In an early episode of *Ulysses*, a minor character, Bantam Lyons, asks to borrow Leopold Bloom's newspaper. Bantam Lyons mutters about the upcoming Gold Cup race: "Wait . . . Half a mo. Maximum the second." Bloom tells him to keep the paper: "I was just going to throw it away" (Ed. Hans Walter Gabler; New York: Vintage, 1986; episode 5, lines 532–4). Bantam Lyons asks him to repeat himself. Again hearing the phrase "throw it away," "Bantam Lyons doubted an instant, leering: then thrust the outspread sheets back on Mr. Bloom's arms.—I'll risk it, he said. Here, thanks" (5.539–41). During the chaotic "Wandering Rocks" episode, about halfway through the book, two other minor characters, Lenehan and M'Coy, briefly discuss how Lenehan has prevented Bantam Lyons from betting on "a bloody horse someone gave him that hasn't an earthly" (10.518–19). Lenehan identifies Bloom as the source of the tip. Later, Lenehan tells his friends at Barney Kiernan's pub that Bloom "had a few bob on *Throwaway* and he's gone to gather the shekels . . . Bet you what you like he has a hundred shillings to five on. He's the only man in Dublin has it. A dark horse" (12.1548–58). When the allegedly enriched Bloom later fails to stand drinks for the crowd at the pub, a disagreeable nationalist called the Citizen grows increasingly angry with him. The episode concludes