

THE PROCESS AND THE MOMENT. A NOTE ON TERRY EAGLETON AND ALAIN BADIOU'S NOTIONS OF TIME AND HISTORY, AND THEIR IDEA OF THE GOOD LIFE¹

EL PROCESO Y EL MOMENTO. UNA NOTA SOBRE LAS NOCIONES DE TIEMPO E HISTORIA Y LA IDEA DE VIDA BUENA EN LA OBRA DE TERRY EAGLETON Y ALAIN BADIOU

J. Manuel Barbeito Varela



Universidade de Santiago de Compostela

jmanuel.barbeito@usc.es

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Abstract: Commenting on Alain Badiou's *Ethics*, Terry Eagleton states that Badiou is "as much caught in a sort of antithesis between the ordinary and epiphanic as Derrida". The opposition between process and moment is inherent to various key oppositions in Western culture: ascesis vs. ecstasy, works vs. faith, observation vs. contemplation, perception vs. vision, reason vs. imagination, discourse and calculation vs. intuition, finitude vs. infinity, time vs. eternity, life vs. death, ordinary vs. authentic life. This essay focuses on Eagleton's and Badiou's dialectical treatment of these oppositions and its bearing on their notions of time and history and their proposal of an idea of the good life on a materialist basis.

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In the first part of the essay, I will briefly look at the question in the Western tradition. In a first step, I will consider various aspects of the relation between the process and the moment as they appear in a few well-known poems in English; in a second step, I will examine Peter Osborne's discussion of the relevance of the moment for the temporalization of (chronological) time and history in his book *The Politics of Time*. In the second part of the essay, I will contrast Eagleton's and Badiou's competing solutions to the problem by analysing their points of convergence and divergence and exploring their causes.

Keywords: Terry Eagleton; Alain Badiou; Marxism; materialism; time; history; ethics; the good life.

Resumen: Al comentar la *Ética* de Alain Badiou, Terry Eagleton afirma que Badiou está "tan atrapado como Derrida en una especie de antítesis entre lo ordinario y lo epifánico". La oposición entre proceso y momento es inherente a varias oposiciones clave en la tradición occidental: ascesis vs. éxtasis, obras vs. fe, observación vs. contemplación, percepción vs. visión, razón vs. imaginación, discurso y cálculo vs. intuición, finitud vs. infinito, tiempo vs. eternidad, vida vs. muerte, vida ordinaria vs. vida auténtica. Este artículo se centra en el tratamiento dialéctico de estas oposiciones por parte de Eagleton y Badiou y el efecto de tal tratamiento en sus nociones de tiempo e historia y en su propuesta de una idea de la vida buena sobre una base materialista que supera dichas oposiciones.

En la primera parte del ensayo examinaré brevemente esta cuestión en la tradición occidental. En primer lugar, consideraré varios aspectos de la relación entre el proceso y el momento tal y como aparecen en algunos poemas bien conocidos en inglés; en una segunda etapa, examinaré el enfoque de Peter Osborne, particularmente en lo que respecta a la relevancia del momento para la temporalización del tiempo (cronológico) y la historia, en su libro *The Politics of Time*. En la segunda parte del ensayo, contrastaré las soluciones que Eagleton y Badiou dan al problema, analizaré sus puntos de convergencia y divergencia y examinaré sus causas.

Palabras clave: Terry Eagleton; Alain Badiou; marxismo; materialismo; tiempo; historia; ética; vida buena.

I. The process and the moment

According to Martin Buber, any experience of plenitude is a moment of eternity: “each moment that is lived staking the whole existence in it” has a “content of eternity” that makes possible the rare knowledge “of an eternity that sustains and devours all time” (Buber 120; translation mine). The momentary experience of another dimension has been considered crucial for human life in the Western tradition and, after Romanticism, the contact with another dimension of reality was sought in the little things of this world. According to Octavio Paz, “[t]rue life is the perception of *alterity's lightening* in any of our acts, without excluding even the most trivial” (Paz 266; translation and emphasis mine).

According to Robert Langbaum, the epiphanic moment is central to modern literature and Wordsworth's treatment of this moment makes him the founder of modern poetry (Langbaum, “The Epiphanic Mode”). For Wordsworth, “Our destiny, our nature, and our home / Is with infinitude, and only there” (*The Prelude* VI, 539) and this destiny is anticipated in an ecstatic moment. In this moment, ordinary life is suspended, and a kind of death is lived: “the breath of this corporeal frame / And even the motion of our human blood / [is] Almost suspended” (“Tintern Abbey” ll. 43-45).

I.1. Notes on the problem in the Western tradition

The gap between ascetic process and ecstatic moment can be detected both in high culture—from a discourse by Plato to a poem by Christopher Norris—and in a Steven Spielberg film.

In Plato's *Symposium*, Socrates reproduces Diotima's account of the moment of change from one dimension to the other:

Anyone who has been guided to this point in the study of love and has been contemplating beautiful things in the correct way and in the right sequence, will suddenly perceive, as he now approaches the end of his study, a beauty that is marvellous in its nature—the very thing, Socrates, for the sake of which all the earlier labours were undertaken (210e).

Led by his guide, the initiated ascends with effort the ladder of degrees of beautiful things, but the ascesis takes him “almost in reach of the goal” (211b), not to the goal itself; the vision of the form of beauty comes only “suddenly”. Diotima states that contemplation is the good life: “a human being should live, in the contemplation of beauty itself” (211d). Socrates agrees.

In Norris's “Interludes” the moment suspends the lovers' normal life course: “Whatever brought / Us two to this odd pass, the moment blurred / All sense of normal time-

scales" (*The Matter* 223-224). And in "Variables" a Beethoven variation can "in a moment, port / Us beyond reach of custom's aide-memoire" (325).

When in *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, after all his troubles and travels Harrison Ford reaches the end of the quest, he must still face the abyss that separates him from the cave of the Grail and that no prodigious jump can cross; only a leap of faith will do to reach his goal and give sense to his previous adventures.

The other dimension can be transcendent, as in the religious tradition (e.g., the dimension of Milton's "Heavenly Muse"), or immanent, as in the secular tradition (the dimension of Wordsworth's "gentle breeze"); if immanent, it can be pantheistic, as in Wordsworth, or materialist: "flesh forgives division as it makes / Another's moment of consent its own" (Auden 115).

The ecstatic moment always suspends the process. In the second stanza of Yeats's "The Wild Swans at Coole", the speaker remembers how the swans, "suddenly" mounting, interrupted his process of counting nineteen years ago. The rhyme "count" – "mount" connects the opposites:

The nineteenth autumn has come upon me
 Since I first made my count;
 I saw, before I had well finished,
 All suddenly mount
 And scatter wheeling in great broken rings (*Poems* 72).

As the metonymic link between the last line of the first stanza and the first line of the second, along with the beginning and the end of the whole syntactic sequence with "upon", makes plain, it is the counting by which human time is engendered as a series that determines this speaker's experience of time and separates him from the swans: "Upon the brimming water among the stones / Are nine-and-fifty swans // The nineteenth autumn has come upon me."

If the vision can interrupt chronological time, time may also represent the real that interrupts the imaginary harmony of a kiss or a dance. Thus, the clocks in Auden's "As I Walked Out One Evening" warn: "Time watches from the shadow / And coughs when you would kiss . . . time breaks the threaded dances / And the diver's brilliant bow" (134).

The interruption can be abrupt or gentle: while in Wordsworth's "There was a Boy" the protagonist experiences "[a] gentle shock of mild surprise", in Yeats's "Leda and the Swan" there is a violent "sudden blow" (247). The consequences of the ecstatic experience are normally positive, as in Wordsworth (see, for instance "Tintern Abbey" and "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud"), but can also be negative, as the speaker states in the third stanza of "The Wild Swans at Coole": "I have looked upon those brilliant creatures,

/ And now my heart is sore" (*Poems* 72). At a historical level, the consequences of the encounter can be apocalyptic, as in Yeats's system (*A Vision*; see also, for instance, "Leda and the Swan" and "No Second Coming") or redemptive, as in the Christian myth. In any case, the moment is decisive: "[c]e premier moment [of the encounter between the 18-years-old Jean-Jacques and the 28-years-old Mme de Warens] *décida de moi pour toute ma vie, et produisit par un enchaînement inévitable le destin du reste de mes jours*" (Rousseau 113).

The problematic relation between the ascetic and the ecstatic dimensions has plagued Western history and culture with all kinds of problems. The split, which has pre-Christian roots in Orphism, as Paul Ricœur has shown (for the Orphists, the true nature of the soul, veiled in ordinary existence, was revealed in moments of trance)², has left its trace in the problematic relation between body and soul and faith and works. On the one hand, according to Paul, works without faith are dead (Heb. 6.1) and can only "bring forth fruit unto death" (*King James Version*, Rom. 7.5); on the other hand, according to James, faith is either incarnated in works or dead (Jas. 2.14-16).

Effort is often considered worth it only if ecstasy is achieved, as in Yeats's "Adam's Curse": "I said, 'A line will take us hours maybe; / Yet if it does not seem a moment's thought, / Our stitching and unstitching has been naught'" (*Poems* 72). Although this is true of *Paradise Lost* too, in Milton's poem, perhaps surprisingly, the linguistic and temporal processes that entail the possibility of the fall are also a condition—the material condition—of salvation. Heavenly creatures communicate intuitively and have no need of articulate language; consequently, there is no temporal gap between their intentions and their actions as Sin makes clear when she reminds Satan of the moment of his fall (ll.747-758). In contrast to Satan, the human couple did not suddenly fall for ever into utter despair. To the process of temptation in which the serpent entangled Eve corresponds a process of redemption. Although the divine grace is the theological precondition of salvation, it comes second in the dramatic presentation of repentance. And this necessarily so: human beings are redeemable because imperfect, temporal.

I.2. Peter Osborne. The moment and the totalization of time and history.

In *The Politics of Time*, Osborne comments on the main twentieth century contributions to the ideas of time and history, while pointing out the shortcomings of each theory's attempt at articulating the relation between the moment and the process for a politics of time.

2 See *Finitude et Culpabilité* part II, chapter 4.

Osborne relies on Ricœur's magnum opus *Time and Narrative*, but for him Ricœur remains at the level of transcendental narrativity and is thus unable to counter the dehistoricisation caused by modern information, fashion, mechanised work, and the commodity. Osborne invites us to find ways of resisting this in the cultural forms of modernity and in "the existential modality of everydayness".

Against the modern fragmentation of time, Osborne defends the totalization of history. Heidegger made it possible to conceive the totality of Dasein's existence, but this applied only to the individual. To think the totalization of history it is necessary to rethink Benjamin's notion of the moment.

By inserting difference into the present (retentions and protentions are living parts of the present), Husserl's Phenomenology offered an alternative to the Aristotelian reduction of the present to an abstract point without duration between an instant before and an instant after³. Phenomenology is indispensable to resist the fragmentation of human experience caused by the dominant quantification of time in modernity but, as Osborne points out, Husserl could not connect the individual consciousness of time to history.

The anticipant resolution makes the Dasein's totalization of time possible, but Heidegger could not relate being-for-death and being-with-others. In contrast to Hegel, he was unable to think the temporal process of recognition and, in contrast to Marx, he was unable to conceive self-fulfilment as the fulfilment of all. Thus impaired, Heidegger could not connect the existential and the social levels. In *Being and time*, authentic time is purely individual and unhistorical; ordinary time is inauthentic and historical time a degradation of historicity (Ricœur, *Temps et récit* III 90-144)..

Heidegger's only alternative to prevent historical fragmentation was the repetition of a newly created past, the myth of a people that has never existed (Osborne 170) but that appears "in a 'moment of vision'" (169). The nightmare of Nazism was the materialisation of such vision⁴: the anticipant resolution becomes the resolution to immolate oneself to this myth. In terms of politics and history, the future to which existential time opens is closed by this myth of the past (173-174).

Levinas' notion of "the time of the other" connects personal and historical time. In contrast to Dasein's being-for-death, the time of the other includes a future after-my-death and entails the responsibility of the living towards future generations. But Levinas' other is absolute. Therefore, not only does it exclude the possibility of recognition, as

3 For the Aristotelian notion of time, see *Temps et récit* III, 22ff.

4 For a frontal attack on the politics implicit in Heidegger's thought, see Norris's "Setting Accounts".

Derrida has shown, but the exclusive relation with it renders mutual recognition irrelevant. The time of the other thus relates the present and the future at the cost of ignoring the process of intersubjective recognition in the present.

Jacques Lacan described the drama of misrecognition in the mirror stage, but the other is absent from it and no temporal process exists in this scene, according to Osborne. It was Jean Laplanche who temporalized recognition by introducing the process of interpretation in the life of the child. The whole thing begins in a linguistic moment when the child is faced with an enigmatic signifier, a question or demand coming from the other that the child is unable to answer and represses thus generating the unconscious. The moment engenders the temporal process of interpretation of this demand, but time and history remain separate because this intersubjective encounter remains a private affair.

Like Heidegger, Benjamin opposed both the modern fragmentation of time and the historicist attempt to mend it. Both in Heidegger and Benjamin there is “some notion of the ecstatic to disrupt any straightforward narrative continuity” as conceived by Historicism (Osborne 175).

For Benjamin, true history is “the site for those momentary glimpses of the truth of time which are condensed into the experience of his ‘now’” (Osborne 176); the experience of the *Jetztzeit* is the true experience of history. It is in these moments, when the messianic image irrupts announcing the future, that “the illusion of ... continuity with the past” established by the history of the winners is interrupted (179). When this occurs, the emancipatory past events acquire “a higher degree of actuality” than they had when they empirically took place (Benjamin, quoted in Osborne 144). Eagleton and Badiou are inspired by this idea.

Benjamin’s aim was “the refiguration of the everyday through interruption” (Osborne 185). The danger of this, Osborne argues, is that the moment should only interrupt the present, suspend succession with no positive historical effect. To avoid this, according to Osborne, the “*Jetztzeit*” must be seen “as an integral moment within a new, non-traditional, future-oriented, and internally disrupted form of narrativity (158-59). Only if integrated in a historical narrative, Osborne argues, can the messianic image engender futurity (152).

Unlike Heidegger, Benjamin did not spurn everydayness. On the contrary, for him the dehistoricised time of capitalism could not totally colonize the quotidian; even in the commodities there is a remainder of another dimension. What Surrealism did, for Benjamin, Osborne explains, was to liberate the “psychic energy trapped in the autonomous

work of art” and theorize “this as a liberation of historical energy, trapped in the commodity form, the social form of autonomous art” (183).

The amnesiac time of mechanised work, the masses, fashion, the commodity, information, and consumption may deeply affect contemporary lives —“events are consumed as images, independently of each other, and without narrative connection” (Osborne 197)—, but phenomenological time and everydayness, Osborne argues, are irreducible to chronological time and commodification, and cultural practices incessantly offer new narrative compositions that recue ecstatic moments from insignificance.

II. Eagleton vs Badiou.

According to Charles Taylor, the contemplation of the good is the source of moral strength and essential to prevent the moral corruption caused by the imposition of high standards (516). There is a kind of superego ethics of Kantian lineage, Eagleton points out, in which “obligation lies at the core of ethical argument”, an ethics “about remorse, self-reproach and absolute responsibility” (Eagleton, *Trouble* 309). If the moral law is to be compatible with freedom the moral imperative must express the idea of the good that one desires. But a major problem characteristic of modernity is its incapacity to answer the question about the good, about the meaning of life (Taylor 9). Eagleton and Badiou try to answer this question.

Some, such as Burke, Dostoevsky, and Taylor would say that moral values must be rooted in the tradition so that they can be spontaneously practiced (this does not necessarily entail relativism; as Taylor argues, traditional values should not be directly accepted but criticized in a context of rational interlocution). Although the Christian tradition is highly important for both Eagleton and Badiou they do not appeal to tradition in this way. Their Marxism leads them to lay the foundations of their universalism somewhere else, on what Marx termed the “species being”.

In Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, we can find the parameters of the debate on the relation between the good life and contemplation. Aristotle distinguishes between two kinds of good life: a life of “virtuous actions, the political and warlike” and the life of “contemplative activity”. Only the latter achieves plenitude: “this activity would constitute the complete happiness of a human being. Provided, that is, that it goes together with a complete span of life, for there is nothing incomplete in what belongs to happiness” (1177b).

The opposition between common ordinary life and the good life is implicit in Aristotle’s argument, but not worth mentioning because for him, as Taylor explains, common

ordinary life was only the infrastructure of “‘the good life’ of contemplation and one’s action as citizen”. Only with the “Reformation, we find a modern, Christian-inspired sense that ordinary life [which includes family life] was ... the very centre of the good life” (Taylor 13). Nor is there an opposition between action and contemplation, on the contrary, intellectual activity and contemplation are inseparable for Aristotle; as Eagleton states, “[f]or Aristotle, human happiness is an activity, not in the first place a state of mind” (*Trouble* 303). The contrast is between two kinds of virtuous activities, one practical, the other theoretical. Although the political and warlike virtues “are preeminent in nobility and greatness” they are not complete in themselves because they are in the service of another good. Contemplation, on the contrary, is an end in itself. Unexpectedly, another dimension pops up here: such completeness “exceed[s] what is human” (Aristotle 1177b). There is another dimension of the human, one of divine perfection.

Aristotle reserves the qualification of plenitude to contemplation, but in Eagleton’s reading it applies to all kinds of virtuous life: Aristotle’s is “an ethics for which the good consists in a high-spirited abundance of life” (*Trouble* 302). Enjoying one’s behaviour is inseparable from doing good; any kind of virtue is an end in itself. Nonetheless, Eagleton’s caveats regarding Aristotelian virtue ethics introduce tensions in his argument. On the one hand, the advantage of Aristotle’s ethics is that, unlike Lacanian desire, desire for Aristotle can be fulfilled (302). On the other hand, Aristotle’s ethics “belongs wholly to the symbolic order” and therefore ignores that “there is that within our everyday desires which tends to play havoc with them” (303-304); in other words, Aristotle’s empiricism ignores the metaphysics of desire that prevents the achievement of fulfilment. The way out of this contradiction for Eagleton is the Christian “allegory of an ethics of the Real” (290).

Badiou focuses precisely on the distinction that Eagleton passes over: “But a life of this sort would exceed what is human” (Aristotle 1177b). He admires Aristotle’s instruction not to think “only about human things because one is a human being, nor only about mortal things because one is mortal, but rather to make oneself immortal” (1177b). The good life for Badiou, like Aristotle’s contemplative life, “would exceed what is human”. This excess, though, entails infinity for Badiou, something Aristotle could not think because perfection necessarily entailed limits for the Greeks.

II.1. Finitude and infinity

Eagleton and Badiou seem totally opposed on the question of time and the good life because, while Eagleton defends the possibility of the good life in a finite ordinary dimen-

sion, Badiou argues that the possibility of the good life lies beyond the limits of ordinary life in the dimension of infinity.

The series of oppositions in which, according to Eagleton, Badiou is caught begins with “truth (or faith) versus knowledge” and culminates in “eternity as against time” (*Trouble* 265). Eagleton introduces an important qualification to this judgement by stating that, rather than a blunt opposition of eternity vs. time, Badiou’s version of “[t]he event inaugurates its own peculiar time” (264). Nonetheless, this “peculiar time” has little to do with human time as it “raises us above our creatureliness” (264). In Badiou’s view, Eagleton argues, human time “belongs to the menial sphere of our species being” (269); “menial” because he “does not accept that the infinite ... may be encountered only by a tragic confrontation with one’s finitude” (269).

The happiness of the subject for Badiou certainly depends on “*sa découverte, à l’intérieur de lui-même de sa capacité à faire quelque chose dont il ne se savait pas capable*” and so on passing “*outré la limite . . . En ce sens, tout bonheur est une victoire contre la finitude*” (*Métaphysique* 53). For Badiou, as for Wordsworth, “Our destiny, our nature, and our home / Is with infinitude, and only there” (*The Prelude*, VI, 539-40). But if we are to believe Badiou, for him “[t]he most simple ethical rule [is] to find the point where we must affirm that the infinite exists in new dialectics with the finite”; hence, the imperative “find[s] in existence . . . a new relationship between finitude and the infinite” (“The Ontology of Multiplicity” I). And if, according to Eagleton, “the infinite . . . may be encountered only by a tragic confrontation with one’s finitude”, then neither Eagleton nor Badiou rejects either finitude or infinity; on the contrary, both agree on the need to establish a dialectical relation between them.

There is a bad and a good infinite to which two dimensions of time correspond. For both Badiou and Eagleton it is a question of engaging in the good infinite and avoiding falling prey to the bad infinite of desire and its deadly conjunction with the commodity in a consumerist world.

Badiou explains the opposition between the good and a bad infinity in mathematical terms. Endless succession is the essence of finitude, a kind of bad infinity from which true infinity must be released. A number is placed between the finite quantity of predecessors and infinite successors, but the good infinite does not succeed. On the contrary, in terms of set theory, Ω (the first infinite cardinal, the set of integers) interrupts the repetition of the rule of succession, i.e., the still one more⁵. This is decisive because Ω is the mathematical expression of the event: “ ω is a cut which opens something

5 For a full treatment of this see Badiou’s *Number and Numbers*, particularly chapters 9-11.

new . . . We can say it is an image . . . for the event” (“Ontology of Multiplicity” II). It is the event that interrupts succession and introduces the true dimension of the good infinite; we must therefore engage in “[t]he search for ω . . . inside the finite” (“The ontology of multiplicity” I). Eagleton associates the bad infinity to Lacanian desire and to the endless pursuit of successive satisfactions; for him it is the acceptance of finitude that interrupts bad infinity.

Infinite succession, whether of numbers or desire, is what turns infinity bad. Badiou and Eagleton agree that the quantifiable succession of instants is the bad dimension of time. For Badiou, the bad infinity is interrupted by the event and the infinity of the process of truth opened by the event must substitute infinite succession. For Eagleton, in a world where desires are generated by the market, the Lacanian imperative “do not give up on desire” becomes a moral imperative (*Trouble* 325) but must be reoriented. As desire is infinite, nothing commodities can offer will satisfy it. To avoid endless unsatisfaction the infinity of desire must be substituted by the infinity of love: “[i]t is charity which is most importantly limitless, not desire” (*Trouble* 289). In the Christian’s love of a loving God “the good is somehow already enjoyed” and the infinity of desire “gives way to an eternity of abundant life” (289).

Eagleton explains the equation that Marx established between the bad sublime and the bad infinity of commodity exchange. Living time disappears in the commodity; the essence of the commodity’s “monstrous sublimity” is the abstract quantitative nature of time that it encapsulates “confounding . . . all specific qualities into one indeterminate, purely quantitative process”, which allows its autonomous functioning as regards its producers (*The Ideology* 212). Emptied out of any specific quality and without any personal involvement of the protagonists engaged in the act, commodity exchange fragments time into an infinite series of discrete instances (*Walter Benjamin* 29). For Marx, what must be done, Eagleton explains, is to liberate the good infinite, “the true sublime . . . that infinite, inexhaustible heterogeneity of use-value” (“The ideology” 30). Communism is the “liberation of a multiplicity of particular use-values” from the abstraction of the “exchange-value” of the commodity (*The ideology* 215)⁶. It is the communist interruption, which brings about the workers’ appropriation of their time, that initiates true history.

6 Cf. Spivak who in “Ghostwriting”, where she criticises Derrida’s reading of Marx, argues that, rather than liberation of use-values, Marx proposes the workers’ appropriation of the time of the commodity.

II.2 The need for a new orientation and radical change

The communist event is not at hand; still, an idea of a just world and a good life can be offered and enjoyed or at least foretasted in the present. Badiou and Eagleton agree on the need for a new orientation and both of them offer it. This orientation involves a radical change.

Badiou states that “in ordinary life there is no true orientation” (“Philosophy and Time”) and that “the most important goal is to propose [one] to individual life”. Such orientation consists in “a new relationship between truth and justice” (“Eternity in Time”) that would institutionalise equality because before truth we are all equal⁷. Equality is the stumbling block of capitalism. Truth, like grace, is “a possibility to change our life, to go from a disoriented life to a life with strong meaning” (“Philosophy and Time”).

For Eagleton, the universals of equality and justice receive their blood from solidarity that opposes the capitalist instrumentalization of human lives. Solidarity is, one could say, the enactment of equality. The good life for Eagleton is “a form of life which is completely pointless [and] needs no justification beyond its own existence” (*The Meaning* 174-75). This echoes Aristotle’s life of contemplation; but for Eagleton, as for Kant, this means that everyone’s life is end in itself, which entails the universals of equality and justice.

The lighthouse for both Badiou and Eagleton is the communist idea. There are two radically opposite kinds of materialism: The materialism of those who live “completely convinced that the law of the world is the price” (“The Ontology of Multiplicity” II) and the materialism of those who live by faith in communism. The good life is illumined by this faith. Consequently, neither Badiou nor Eagleton can be happy with mere social reform; for both, a radical transformation is necessary. For Eagleton, the reason why a radical change should be necessary is the institutionalisation of selfishness in the capitalist system (*On Evil* 143). For Badiou, it is necessary because corruption is pervading; everything has a price, which systematically corrupts the world.

What real change, different from the continuous change that characterises the capitalist world, is possible if no revolutionary transformation is feasible? What can Marxists mean by radical change in times when an alternative to the capitalist economic system does not seem viable? When the revolution is not possible, the good life can only be lived in another dimension that must be carved out in the current situation. But what makes this possible?

7 In his introduction to *Being and Event*, Badiou expresses his “hope” of “mathematically inferring justice” (15).

According to Historical Materialism moral progress accompanies material progress. The ideals of the Enlightenment were not ethereal. Trade needed freedom from feudal boundaries; if to be a proletarian is better than to be a slave or a serf, it is because, as Marx explains in *Capital*, the former must be free to sell his time. It is true that time is thereby quantified, subject to the laws of the market, and alienated, but the freedom of common people now finds a material foundation in the economic base. If time makes human beings redeemable, as in *Paradise Lost*, history is the process of redemption. But the time when history did things for us is over and, although Badiou acknowledges the advantages of scientific development, he does not pay much attention to their moral consequences. Eagleton's idea of history is perhaps more optimistic. He conceives history and the human being in similar terms: "history itself is a process of self-transcendence. The historical animal is one who is constantly able to go beyond itself" (*On Evil* 16-17). To compensate for the crisis of Historical Materialism, both Eagleton and Badiou, as we shall see, recur to Benjamin's idea of history.

Marxism teaches that ordinary experience is alienated and that only the appropriation of the means of production and the dissolution of private property that generates inequality can create the conditions for human beings to be free, deploy their potentials, and so enjoy a full life. But this must wait and meanwhile desire is manipulated by the market. Although the situation seems desperate, neither Badiou nor Eagleton have been conquered by dismay or given up on their desire of communism. That we live in a materialist world dominated by price from which we cannot escape and that there is little prospect of the realization of the idea of communism by a general transformation of the system does not mean that there is no way of realizing it.

Badiou's and Eagleton's grim picture of the contemporary world may coincide, but for the latter corruption is not absolute, it cannot colonize all the spheres of everydayness; if it did, transformation would be impossible⁸. Badiou invites precisely to be heroic and do the impossible (*Logics* 514). The problem that Eagleton finds with Badiou is not so much the opposition between chronological time and the time opened by the "momentous rupture" of the event, as the elitism he sees in this invitation because it shows little respect, for "the common people", for the "heroism . . . of the anti-heroic masses", for "the common life" (*Trouble* 293), an attitude he considers characteristic of

⁸ Eagleton's attention to the notions of ideology, culture, and everydayness is revealing in this regard (See, for instance, *Ideology*, *Trouble with Strangers*, and *The Idea of Culture*). Ideology cannot be reduced to bad conscience; it includes ways of seeing, thinking, and living, which brings it very close to culture in its anthropological sense. Both ideology and culture are ways of determining human life from within; for those who consider culture homogeneous and absolute, there is no escape from language games. Eagleton does not share this opinion, but the notion of everydayness has the advantage of adding personal idiosyncrasy and non-conventional unpredictable experiences, and of highlighting intersubjective relations.

the Parisian school. But for Eagleton too the impossible must be done, something that Christianity achieves: “Christianity brings together the impossible and the everyday, transcendence and immanence” (300).

As Eagleton states, “[c]lassical Marxism adheres to the ‘Real’ of revolution” (*Trouble* 293). Both Eagleton and Badiou agree on the need of reformulating the Marxist classical moment of interruption of the situation by the emergence of the Real. For both Badiou and Eagleton something impossible within the situation must be done without abandoning it, and for both this entails a kind of dying to one life and resurrecting to another. For Eagleton, the impossible is overcoming the opposites of the sublime and the common place, which is accomplished by an “ethics as love”: common acts of renunciation perform the ritual of death to selfishness and resurrection to love, a “new kind of solidarity” (*Trouble* 299). For Badiou, the impossible is the event that interrupts the situation and opens the dimension of truth to which the individual must incorporate and in which the faithful subject must repeat the interruption.

II.3. The extraordinary and the everyday. Eagleton’s criticism of Badiou’s ethics.

The possibility of achieving plenitude in this world is, for Badiou, opened by the event’s sudden interruption of the situation, ascetically realized in a process of truth, and experienced in moments of ecstasy that repeat the interruption. For Eagleton, as for Matthew, salvation has little ecstatic about it; on the contrary, it is “an embarrassingly prosaic affair something which a lot of decent people do anyway, with scarcely a thought” (*The Meaning* 164-165).

Commenting on Badiou’s *Ethics* in his *Figures of Dissent*⁹, Eagleton highly praises Badiou for putting the “notions of truth and universality back on the agenda” and for his radical “assessment of the sorry ideological mess into which ethical thought has lapsed in its haste to confiscate the political” (253). But he finds problems regarding the discontinuity between the epiphanic moment and ordinary life. Badiou, Eagleton argues, is “as much caught in a sort of antithesis between the ordinary and epiphanic as Derrida” (250). Eagleton acknowledges that Badiou “sees the need for truth and politics to be

9 Eagleton’s first criticism of Badiou appeared in a commentary on Badiou’s *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* (2001) published in the *New Left Review* 9 (2001) and later included as “Alain Badiou” in *Figures of Dissent*. At the time of the appearance of *Ethics* in French (*L’Étique*, 1993), Badiou was redirecting his project to connect the mathematical ontology of *Being and Event* (*L’Être et l’événement*, 1988) to the phenomenology that was to be developed in *Logics of Worlds* (*Logiques des mondes. L’Être et l’événement 2*, 2009). The classic logic of the ontology governed by the principle of non-contradiction and the exclusion of the middle term had to be supplemented with a modal logic that admitted degrees of appearance. If the imperative of the international “we are nothing, let’s be all” could be taken as the motto in *Being and Event*; in *Logic of Worlds* the affirmation of being (“we are...”) is maintained, but the opposition is no longer between existence and nonexistence; there are degrees of existence.

immanent” but argues that “he does not trust the quotidian world sufficiently to believe” that there is anything in it worth salvaging; one might say that, as the speaker of Shakespeare’s sonnet XLIII states, “all the day they [Badiou’s eyes] view things unrespected”. Despite his efforts, Eagleton argues, Badiou fails to overcome the opposition between the moment and the process (268) because the time of the processes of truth is not the time of the symbolic order in which common life processes take place (268).

Eagleton is inclined to a virtue ethics of an Aristotelian rather than to one of a Realist Lacanian lineage. For him, “[v]irtue ethics can remind us that the good is a common-or-garden matter . . . rather than a more imposing, epiphanic affair” (*Figures* 251) and he questions “an ethics for which morality, in the sense of everyday estimations of right and wrong, is scathingly dismissed” (*Trouble* 263). There is no necessary discontinuity between ecstasy and ordinary life because *areté* “both brings that of which it is the *areté* into a good condition and causes the work belonging to that thing to be done well” (Aristotle 1106a); as Bartlett and Collins explain, *areté* “is the chief characteristic of a given type of thing at its peak that also permits or promotes that peak” (xvi).

“Ordinary process” and “epiphanic moment”, like the finite and the infinite, seem to separate Eagleton and Badiou as the issue of works and faith once split Christendom. But, being a materialist, Badiou must not only find the transcendent in the immanent, as the Romantics did, but also connect the ordinary and the epiphanic dimensions. Eagleton acknowledges the effort: “For Badiou, to be sure, ethics is not identical with the revelation of truth; it is rather the business of striving to remain loyal to it, and thus a practical form of life rather than a lonely epiphany” (*Figures* 250).

Nonetheless, for Eagleton, Badiou “inherits the dubious avant-garde doctrine that the human subject is authentic only when audaciously staking its existence in extremis, Truth is a matter of all or nothing” (*Trouble* 262). Hence, Badiou’s mistake “to imagine that a just society must remain in perpetual thrall to its moment of foundation” (301). It is difficult to see, though, how without fidelity to the moment of the Christian foundation of love Eagleton’s community can be built. And if the “full-blooded transformation” required “to establish such unheroic, workaday virtues of justice and equality on a universal scale” (301) would also be required at the individual level, then the choice that the Christian subject must make to be faithful, rather than accommodating to little bourgeois comfort, seems indeed extreme. This seems to be the case, because love (loving ourselves as we love our neighbour) involves seeing oneself in the mirror and acknowledging there, as Oedipus did at Colonus, “a loathsome outcast . . . this thing of darkness [desire]”, which requires an “immeasurable power” (271).

The requirement of fidelity also suggests that, despite Eagleton's rejection of the opposition between knowledge and truth (the first of the series mentioned above which, according to Eagleton, negatively affect Badiou's thought), his concept of truth corresponds to Badiou's. As he states in the conclusion to *Trouble with Strangers*, "nothing in this study takes the truth [of Christianity] for granted" (*Trouble* 323). Truth in Eagleton's Christian-based ethics consists, therefore, in the idea of fidelity to the event, rather than to the agreement between concept and fact.

The fidelity to the event connects the moment and the process, the ascesis and the ecstasy. According to Badiou, the event flares up in a moment and goes out leaving a trace that must be followed in the process of truth¹⁰; in the repetition of the interruption, maximum existence (which can happen when reading a poem, listening to a piece of music, or understanding a theory, not only when inventing a new literary form, classic music, set theory, or quantum mechanics) is achieved. There are moments of maximum and minimum existence; in between, there are degrees. And there are subjects who are faithful to the event by totally breaking with the logics of the world and there are those who are faithful by negotiating with the situation; they do not belong to different spheres. The opposition between extraordinary and ordinary is thus overcome.

The ordinary, though, is not the everyday. Eagleton rejects Badiou's definition of the world "as chronically unregenerate" (*Trouble* 265) because it divides "[t]he exceptional and the everyday" (292). He agrees that not only a "transformation of the system is necessary", as he states in the interview "A Debate with Eagleton" included in this special issue (209); "a root-to-branch transformation of the self" is also needed (*Trouble* 289). But for him the system is not the everyday and the exceptional belongs to the quotidian. While for Badiou it is being that cannot be subsumed, for Eagleton it is the quotidian that cannot be totally colonized by the philosophy of capitalism.

Badiou's ethics is too sublime and disembodied for Eagleton: "An ethics of the mortal body is too unheroic for Badiou" (270). If, on the one hand, in Badiou "the symbolic order is given its proper due, as liberty, equality and universality are acknowledged as precious political goals", on the other, quoting Peter Hallward, Eagleton affirms that in Badiou "'subjectivation is essentially indifferent to the business and requirements of life as such' . . . a strange kind of ethics which regards the business of life as of minor importance" (265).

10 "Moment" is not to be understood as an instant with no duration, rather, as one in which chronological quantification does not matter.

II.4. Love and the communist hypothesis

For both Eagleton and Badiou love is an encounter in the Real. According to Hallward, the sublime in Badiou opens an entirely new dimension of “the Real of a radical fraternity” (quoted in *Trouble* 269). Although the sublime for Eagleton interrupts the ordinary ways of seeing, thinking and being, for him it is not the opposite of ordinary life because the others around us “are the bearers of a sublime strangeness” that we also bear; this provides “the solid ground on which human beings may meet” because “loving oneself . . . [involves] an acceptance of the disfiguring Real at the core of one’s own identity” (291).

How can desire and love, death and life, the real and the symbolic be reconciled? Eagleton and Badiou coincide that this is achieved by the death of the flesh and resurrection in a new body; but for Eagleton this means death to narcissistic selfishness and resurrection to solidarity while for Badiou it means death to the law of the world and incorporation to the process of truth.

Eagleton finds in Christianity “an allegory of the ethics of the Real” and a model of the relation between the sublime and ordinary life based on a new relation between love and desire and between finitude and infinity; this is possible because “[t]here is . . . a form of the Real [the God of love] which desires our welfare rather than disrupts it” (290). In contrast to Lacanian desire, Christian love does not begin with lack but with fullness; and the love-object does not indefinitely flee, because “the Real of divine love may be routinely encountered” by those who believe that what they do to their neighbour they do to Jesus (291). Again, although Eagleton may criticise Badiou’s aspiration to infinity and eternity, he advocates both the Real, as an “excess or infinity” that disrupts the stability of the symbolic order, and the infinity of Christian charity as a source of joy and a way of sharing in eternal life (320).

The crucial point is that for Eagleton there is no “hard-and-fast distinction . . . between the ethical-Real and the political-symbolic” (321). On the contrary, the symbolic—not taken here in its sense of a set of rules or values of a given society but as “abstract exchangeability of individuals”—makes the practice of charity to any human being possible (320). The symbolic and the Real meet in the sublime absurdity (320-321) of the readiness to die for or instead of another (e.g., by substituting him in the queue to the gas chamber): “this unthinkable Real is no more than the exchangeability of the symbolic order pressed to an extreme” (321). At this point, Eagleton’s ethics is no less extreme than Badiou’s.

Love for Badiou (one of the four truth procedures: love, science, politics, art) makes it possible for anyone to become a subject and achieve plenitude. Love realises the

dialectics of finitude and infinity, eternity and time, ascesis and ecstasy. The event of love is the encounter between the lovers, and the process of truth incorporates them to a dimension of eternity in time: love is “*une déclaration d'éternité qui doit se réaliser ou se déployer comme elle peut dans le temps. Une descente de l'éternité dans le temps*” and “[t]out le problème . . . est d'inscrire cette éternité dans le temps (Éloge 53-54). The surrealists (Breton, Nadja), Badiou explains, were devoted to the moment of the encounter, but they were not interested in duration (83). For Badiou, on the contrary, the ascetic process and ecstatic moment are necessarily intertwined in love for love is “*le laborieux devenir d'une vérité construite point par point . . . Il y a un travail de l'amour, et non pas seulement un miracle*”; plenitude is “*la récompense immanente du labeur*” (83-84). We thus go from ecstasy to ascesis and back to moments of ecstasy.

For both Badiou and Eagleton love serves as a model and an instance of realization of communism, which simply affirms, says Badiou, the aim or future of all emancipatory politics, which “*devront s'inscrire dans un résurrection . . . de . . . l'idée d'un monde que n'est pas livré aux appétits de la propriété privée, d'un monde de l'association libre de l'égalité*” (75). Love is communist—the lovers are the “minimum communism”—in the sense that “*le vrai sujet d'un amour est le devenir du couple et non la satisfaction des individus que le composent*” (91).

For Eagleton, as much as for Badiou, the condition of love is an encounter with the other. For Eagleton, this is the encounter with the Real in oneself and in others. For Badiou, it is the encounter with the other who plays the opposite (e.g., sexual) role in the couple. Nor do Badiou and Eagleton differ in the definition of the dimension of love as eternal and infinite or in the discontinuity that exists between this dimension and the dimension of ordinary life colonized by the market. Where they do differ, apart from their evaluation of the quotidian, is on the definition of the basic unit of the community of love: while for Eagleton it is the individual split subject, for Badiou it is the two. The cause of this divergence on the basic unit is the starting point of their analysis: ontological or existential.

For Badiou, love is not what two individuals experience but the experience of being two; the individuals are incorporated into the subject of love. This two is for Badiou the ontological unit (the two in set theory is not the result of the sum of $1 + 1^{11}$; it is constituted by the void set + the void set counted as one $\{0, \{0\}\}$). Eagleton takes from psychoanalysis the idea that the individual subject is intimately constituted by a strange other, an idea that can also be found in Augustine.

11 It is essential to bear in mind that in Badiou's mathematical ontology there are only multiples of multiples; the one is the result of the count-as-one. This is the basic thesis of *Being and Event*.

II.5. Hope. The affirmation of being—the affirmation of nothing

Despite this difference there is something, even more basic, before any count begins, where Eagleton and Badiou meet: the Marxist version of the Real, the species being.

If change is possible, it is because, multiplicity, whether of being or of everydayness, is irreducible for both Eagleton and Badiou; there is a remainder, impossible to be subsumed by the system, that must be acknowledged and affirmed. For Eagleton, this is human creatureliness and he localizes it in everyday life; for Badiou, it is the nothing and he localises in the site, a set that is counted but whose elements are not counted (e.g., the *sans papiers*), do not count in the situation (*Being and Event* 173ff). According to Eagleton, hope for redemption lies in the acceptance of human “creatureliness”—bodily needs, dependence, imperfection, temporality, the battling forces of the human psyche, and death. According to Badiou, hope lies in the affirmation of the nothing that is in the site.

Eagleton and Badiou agree that “[o]nly those who count as nothing in the eyes of the current power system are sufficiently askew to it to inaugurate a radically new dispensation” (*Trouble* 271). Both Badiou and Eagleton propose a subject faithful to the momentary event when the species being, the generic, flared for a moment and interrupted the situation. This event opens a new dimension and fidelity to it is the condition to build and live in another dimension of time.

Both Eagleton and Badiou affirm “what there is for being” (Auden 589), what Marx, in his *Economical and Philosophical Manuscripts*, calls the “species being”, the “shit of the earth” (Saint Paul), “the total loss” (Marx); what does not count in the situation but will become the corner stone that the architects threw away. Commenting on *Oedipus at Colonus* (his favourite Greek hero), Eagleton blends St Paul, Marx and Badiou:

In becoming nothing but the scum and refuse of the polis—the ‘shit of the earth’, as St Paul racily describes the followers of Jesus, or the ‘total loss of humanity’ which Marx portrays as the proletariat—Oedipus is divested of his identity and authority and so can offer his lacerated body as the cornerstone of a new social order (*Trouble* 271).

Such descent to hell, Eagleton states, is more than “Badiou’s more affirmative ethics can accommodate” (*Trouble* 271).

But Badiou’s defence of the affirmative against the post-Hegelian triumph of the negative consists precisely in the affirmation of the generic being that counts as nothing. So, it is not this that distances Eagleton from Badiou, but the embodiment of the nothing and the political associations it grounds. For Eagleton, it is creatureliness, the “intolerable signifier of our shared mortality and fragility” (271); sharing in this “inhuman” dimension creates “a durable human community” (272). Rather than an existential

nothing, Badiou looks for those points that the system cannot count and where radical political action can be developed. While creatureliness is ineluctable, these points are not permanent, they change according to historical circumstances; once it was the proletariat, today the *sans papiers*, for instance.

There is a crucial point here: while Badiou talks of the need for incorporation of individuals to a body that is the bearer of a truth (*Logics* 451), Eagleton sticks to the individual body as the essential element of the species being (“the degree zero of humanity”, *Trouble* 320); his notion of creatureliness is inseparable from the individual body.

While Badiou demystifies Heidegger’s notion of being (*Being and Event*), Eagleton reinterprets Heidegger’s notion of death. Death, for the Badiou of *Logics of Worlds*, is merely a minimum of existence (see book III, section 4). For Eagleton, death is the essence of our creatureliness.

For Eagleton, Heidegger’s notion of the anticipant resolution to accept death takes bodies beyond their biological definition. The problem with Heidegger is, as Osborne pointed out, that “he largely dissociates being-towards-death and being-with-others” (Eagleton, *Sweet Violence* 306). Eagleton agrees with Osborne in this, but he finds Osborne’s solution insufficient because “he passes over the ethical link between them [being-towards-death and being-with-others], evident in the Pauline sense of the self-giving as a proleptic dying” (307). This, in a nutshell, is Eagleton’s way of salvaging Heidegger for radical politics.

It may be difficult to imagine how either Heidegger or the founder of Christian theology can be associated with radical politics. Eagleton is perfectly aware of the difficulty, but he does imagine the service that a proper blend of both can pay. He acknowledges that the “Heideggerian doctrine [of being-for-death] was to find some sinister resonances in the death cult of fascism”; nonetheless, he sustains that “its fidelity to lack and finitude, along with its sense of death as a detotalizing force, could also foster an altogether more radical politics” provided that “every one of Dasein’s instants” is interpreted as “one of the several meanings of St Paul’s ‘we die every moment’” (*Sweet Violence* 116).

The Heideggerian anticipant resolution must be realized in solidarity. Renouncing oneself is a kind of little death: by “we die every moment” Saint Paul means, according to Eagleton, “we rehearse and prefigure that final self-abnegation which is death” (*The Meaning* 158). But renunciation is only a previous negative step to “live well by buckling the self to the needs of others” (158); asceticism leads to the plenitude, because solidarity “provides the context for each self to flourish”, which means “to love” (160). This is the very opposite to Kirillov’s suicide in Dostoevsky’s *Demons*. Possessed by the demon of

nihilism, Kirillov wants to flaunt human power over life and death in an act of rivalry with God. Kirillov's is an affirmation of individualism. The humble little death of self-renunciation is, on the contrary, an affirmation of solidarity.

II.6. The discipline of freedom and the exercise of virtue

On the one hand, Badiou underscores discipline while Eagleton emphasises spontaneous behaviour; on the other hand, Badiou underscores grace while Eagleton emphasises works. Materialism forces both to combine grace and works, ecstasy and asceticism.

For Badiou full life entails hard discipline: "*l'essence véritable de la liberté, condition essentielle du bonheur réel, est la discipline*" and "[un]sujet existe au point où il est impossible de distinguer entre discipline et liberté" (*Métaphysique* 52). This is because freedom does not consist in doing what you wish but "*ce qui est prescrit par le réel*" (51), which is extremely difficult. For Eagleton, common people practice solidarity in their ordinary life with no effort: "To live the life of grace is to acquire the spontaneous habit of goodness in the manner of Aristotle's virtue, rather as a graceful dancer is one who performs without effort" (*Trouble* 307). Nonetheless, to get the habit of nonchalantly performing virtuous actions requires hard training. And as wickedness is institutional, the struggle against it entails nothing less than detaching oneself from the conventional ways of seeing, thinking, and living, which is also extremely difficult.

Badiou appropriates religious language to emphasise the need of grace "to go from a disoriented life to a life with strong meaning . . . beyond the determination by the world as it is", a movement that amounts to "something like redemption" ("Philosophy and Time"). Eagleton sees a puritan bias in this emphasis on grace and defends the practice of good deeds that will lead us to achieve a gracious performance of them. But Eagleton also appeals to the grace of love as the living spirit of solidarity which makes redemption possible.

II.7. Another time, another history

The worker has lost possession of part of his time that belongs to the employer who has purchased it at market price. The time of work, the abstract value of which is fixed by cold calculation, is thus split from the rest of the worker's life. For both Badiou and Eagleton the redemption of time is a condition of the good life. In Badiou's words, "*être maître de son temps*" is "*une condition du bonheur*" (*Métaphysique* 26).

The fragmentation of time became generalised with consumerism. Both Badiou and Eagleton reject the pursuit of satisfaction in an infinite succession of discrete moments that characterizes capitalist lifestyle. For Badiou, satisfaction is “*une forme de mort subjective*” because it renders the human animal incapable of becoming “*le sujet générique qu’il est capable d’être*” (53). Succession must be interrupted by a moment of plenitude that redeems time from bad infinity. In contrast to an abstract point between the instant before and the instant after, the present of the good life is an image of eternity. Echoing Benjamin, Eagleton states: “It is the present moment which is an image of eternity, not an infinite succession of such moments” (*The Meaning* 175).

Recalling Wittgenstein, Eagleton says that “if there is such a thing as eternal life, it must be here and now” (*The Meaning* 175) and Badiou affirms that “philosophy is oriented by the idea of the existence of eternity in time” (“Philosophy and Time”). Another world coexists with this—“an exception to the determination” of the dominant system—and anticipates the future: “everybody is equal in front of the truth. And if the truth is social . . . political truth, everybody is equal in the world as it is, maybe not immediately but as a project, as a possibility” (“Philosophy and Time”). Although a systematic transformation of the world is not expected, “the present of humanity can realize a certain form of relationship between truth and justice” (“Philosophy and Time”). The realisation of this future in the present counteracts the fixation in each successive moment, the current obedience to the imperative “*carpe diem*”, a deadly instruction to live every day “like there’s no tomorrow” (*The Meaning* 158).

Benjamin’s idea of resurrection has inspired both Eagleton and Badiou. Redemption consists in the subtraction of time and history from abstract quantification and infinite succession by gathering in constellations eventual moments that have suddenly flared in the past but have been buried by the winners’ history. According to Badiou, the first philosophical directive is “Interrogate the flashes!” (*Logics* 507). In *Métaphysique du réel perdu*, commenting Pasolini’s lament in his 1954 poem on Gramsci that the idea of emancipatory history had been reduced to ashes, Badiou insists on an idea of history that would thread the points of interruption of the historical continuum, from Spartacus to May 1968.

II.8. Flashes in dark times.

To look reality in the face and maintain the flame of hope burning is difficult and when the colonization of desire by the market is so widespread, the possibility of another life must be envisioned in the crevices of the system where glimpses of transcendence,

intimations of eternity, can be caught. In his poem “Ectopiques” (*The Winnowing Fan*), Norris echoes Eagleton’s and Badiou’s attempt to overcome oppositions in a materialist idea of the good life. The poet finds ways of doing this in the matter of language that poetry transubstantiates. In the preamble of the poem, Norris warns against grandiose historical projects because they lead to “reactive (dystopian) despair” and defends “‘ectopic’ departures from the . . . norm” that offer “some workable solution”. The speaker of the poem commands to “seek small transcendences in everyday Events”. Although this may be a

momentary lapse
In our coordinates of time and space
That gives us the first inkling of a chink
Through which we might just glimpse another place (*The Winnowing* 33)

such glimpse leaves a trace, “lingers as a sense of zones unmapped”. It is in those “New worlds ... [that] figure nowhere on the maps” where “a *vita nuova*” can be led. These worlds are not far distant places; on the contrary, “This *autre-monde*” is “not so far apart/ From *monde* quotidienne”; in fact, it shares “With the old one ... a common sky / And history enough to make it theirs”. Ectopic events may take place, for instance, in the materiality of language, whose irreducible multiplicity is constitutive of our spiritual essence. See, for example, the conjunction of the beautiful (the harmonious regulated order represented by “rhyme”) and the sublime (that disrupts stable structures and reveals something unexpected beyond regulations):

rhyme
Is just the kind of opportune event

In language, as in thought, that makes ‘sublime’
An adjective quite fittingly deployed
For serendipity of verbal chime (*The Winnowing* 56)

Minor changes of the normal ways of seeing things reveal “suddenly . . . a new world beneath the common sky” and ways of living a full life.

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