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Item Type	Article
Authors	Critchley, Simon;Strobbe, Nicholas;Dalton, John, 1814-1874;Banki, Peter
Publisher	Contretemps
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Download date	2026-09-19 20:10:32
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/177980



‘Beckett is my hero (it’s alright)’. An interview with Simon Critchley

Simon Critchley, Nicholas Strobbe, John Dalton, Peter Banki

Sydney, April 2000

NS The encounter of Derrida and Lévinas has been a longstanding issue in your thought. Beginning with *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, you engaged in a marked shift towards the priority accorded to the political in Derrida over that of Lévinas. To what extent has this been informed by an attention to the facticity of the ethico-political, one that remains open to the possibility of an other relation?

SC The first thing is to wind the clock back a bit. Derrida was the expression of the philosophical avant-garde, where philosophy done in a Heideggerian way ended up at its most radical. So, in that sense, Derrida was suddenly the person that everybody, whatever their political orientation, was reading. The context for that reading, certainly for me, was Hegel’s critique of Kant. This is still very much where I situate the problematic of things that interest me, insofar as Kant’s Copernican revolution establishes the cognitive meaninglessness of dogmatic metaphysics and the moral defensibility of a certain metaphysical view, the primacy of practical reason, which has a certain dimension I would still want to very much defend.

Ethics, in a sense, for me has to be Kantian to a certain extent, and Lévinas — in that sense — is an echo of certain Kantian preoccupations. There is that remark about Kant as the Moses of the German nation. I think Kant has been structurally Jewish rather than German for that whole tradition. But then, the other side of that is Hegel’s critique of Kant. The problem with Kant is that he leaves us in a formalism, an empty formalism, of pure duty without any relationship to effective social praxis. That critique goes through into early Marxism. That’s the context of it. Derrida, strangely, was read by people like me and the people that taught me, particularly the Hegelians, as some sort of post-Hegelian Kantian. Now, the problem of Derrida as well is the problem of formalism. It looks like a hyper-transcendental philosophy in which Derrida points out the conditions of possibility for any philosophical discourse as such. That seems to be persuasive. But what prevents this from simply being a formal operation without any substantive philosophical content, or without any substantive ethical and political

commitments? That's where I enter the picture, as I see it. The link with Lévinas is how can you give to Derrida's thought, which looks formalistic, some substantive phenomenological flesh. Lévinas seemed to be a way of expressing a basic Derridean intuition, if you like, in a way that got round that formalism problem. That's the concern with the facticity of the political.

PB Derrida has this very famous reading of Lévinas in "Violence and Metaphysics" in which he accuses Lévinas of empiricism. The problem with empiricism is that it's a kind of non-philosophy. So, in a certain sense, Derrida is taking the opposite viewpoint. Your claim is that Derrida is too formal, and Derrida's claim is that Lévinas is too empirical, he's too fleshly.

SC In a way, yes. It's true that Derrida reinscribes Lévinas' thought into the tradition from which it is trying to twist free, putting it back into the Hegelian, Husserlian, Heideggerian context, against which Lévinas was expressly trying to work. Does he succeed in that? Yes, I think he does. What's the consequence of that? That depends on how you read that essay. In many ways that essay became a very important test case for what deconstruction was about. On the one hand, you have what looks like a critique of Lévinas, in that he can't distance himself from Heidegger in the way in which he wants to, or from Husserl in the way in which he wants to. On the other hand, through the work of someone like Robert Bernasconi, it was thought that deconstruction had to be a form of double reading, and if it's a form of double reading then it has to give equal weight to two claims.

A text like "Violence and Metaphysics" is a sort of proto-deconstructive text because the actual term 'deconstruction' isn't used in that text until Derrida corrects it for the 1967 edition of *Writing and Difference*, where he adds a couple of references (I did some work on the different editions of the essay a long time ago). So this text becomes a test case insofar as in deconstruction there seems to be, on the one hand, a critique which is, as it were, demolishing a certain framework of discourse, whether that's Lévinas or whether that's Foucault in the earlier essay on Bataille. On the other hand, if deconstruction is not just critique then there has to be another aspect to that reading which in a sense is defending something in that. Then the question is, well, if that is true, then there must be an ethical observation to deconstructive reading as it's practiced in "Violence and Metaphysics." There's something ethical about the way in which Derrida reads, and what's ethical about it is that it's a double-handed reading where you read in terms of two gestures within the same text. The way in which the empiricism criticism of Lévinas is weighted comes from the opening pages of "Violence and Metaphysics" where Derrida talks about the community of the question, the possibility of the question, the need for decision, and the need for an unbreachable responsibility — that became very important. There is something ethical about deconstructive reading as a procedure, which means that it is not just critical, because these two gestures are at work at the same time. The question that was being asked, and that I was asking, was 'what sort of ethics does it actually offer?'

NS Does this mark a shift, then, from moral reasoning in Kant to an ethical reasoning?

SC Well, the question was, 'what sort of ethical claim is a thinker like Derrida making?' There is something ethical. So what deconstruction is is a method, or a procedure of reading, which is better than other methods because it has higher standards

of rigour, higher standards of reading and of clarity of argument. Derrida's reading of Rousseau stands up to scrutiny because it's a powerful reading of Rousseau and you can check it and see how Rousseau's text changes when you go back to Rousseau. So the idea that deconstruction was an exemplary form of scholarship was an important thought, there was an ethical motivation there at its root. That ethical motivation could be something like a hermeneutics in Gadamer's sense of just being attentive to the claim of the text, being attentive to the strangeness of the text and the familiarity of the text. Deconstruction in that sense is similar to hermeneutics.

But there is more going on in Derrida's work — there's a specific ethical claim that makes sense in Lévinasian terms. The way Derrida's work has evolved subsequently seems to confirm that. Now, the strange thing about *The Ethics of Deconstruction* as a book was that it was conceived as one of two books. There was going to be this book, *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, and my supervisor Robert Bernasconi was going to write a book on "Violence and Metaphysics." The two books were going to be mirrors of each other, but Robert never finished it. The idea was to try and bring out this ethical dimension of deconstruction. At the time that seemed a completely counter-intuitive thought, and I think this is an interesting example of the way in which terrain shifts. I mean, the way *Ethics and Deconstruction* was received a couple of years after it was published was, 'oh yes, well, Derrida is an ethical thinker in a Lévinasian sense, we all know that', but that wasn't the case in the eighties — it just wasn't. Derrida was not read like that at that time, it was thought that he was obviously some sort of anarchistic Nietzschean, or some sort of hyper-Hegelian; so that the ethical reading suddenly became available. A couple of years after it was published the first book was met with 'oh, we know this is true, it's banal, and the political critique is wrong, because it doesn't do justice to Derrida's work'. Now, the first thing is that the ethical claim is actually not banal or self-evident; it became, for whatever reason, a claim that Derrida was then prepared to make in texts like "Force of Law" and then in *Specters of Marx*.

The *Ethics of Deconstruction* was structured around what I call *clôtural* reading or double reading, the logic of which is that there has to be a moment of radical ingratitude in order for reading to be reading. You can't just say 'what a good book that is'. The last chapter, the long last chapter, was a more or less savage critique of Derrida on the question of politics. But that worked within a logic of the argument of the book. So, to come back to the question, the shift in the priority accorded to the political in Derrida over that of Lévinas was occasioned by a conceptual shift in Derrida's work. He was prepared to say things like "deconstruction is justice," which he wouldn't have been prepared to say, and to describe those claims in Lévinasian terms. That was something new. So the, as it were, empirical context or factual context wasn't really doing the work. The empirical context of the earlier work for most people in Britain in the 1980s was Thatcherism. How does one defend a leftist project against that barbarism? The tradition of leftism that I came out of, which wasn't Marxist, was a sort of ethical socialism of one sort or another which used to have a home in the Labour party — so that's a reason why Lévinas fitted into that in some strange way.

NS For Derrida, ethics is marked in the unprecedented encounter with the other, this encounter with which I do not coincide, and whose possibility makes possible justice, a justice that is, precisely, disjunctive, in contradistinction to Heidegger's conceptual intimation of jointure, *a-dikia*, or *Un-fug*. To what extent can the concrete instance of the political, of the calculable and of law, be coordinate with the impossible demand of

justice and the incalculable? Further, what guarantee is there that the incalculable is justice, and not injustice?

SC There is no way in which the concrete instance of the political can coordinate with the demand of justice. If the demand of justice is incalculable then by definition any political act cannot coincide with it, and there is no guarantee that such a political act would guarantee justice.

PB It's an answer that leaves open other questions.

SC Very open. Derrida says in one place that the worst evil would be to try and assure oneself that evil was not part of one's action. So, in a sense, the worry Derrida has about Habermas, I think, is that it seems to be a social and political theory based on certain guarantees that evil isn't going to happen. For Derrida, the whole figure of politics has to be based upon this moment of the 'perhaps', which is that perhaps it is just, perhaps it is unjust. Now, that can go too far, I think. That thought can end up in a political vacuity. But I think there's more of a biblical thought in Derrida, that there is an impossible demand, which is the demand of the good, of the other, which I cannot reckon with, which is always already inscribed within my subjectivity in some way, making me who I am, and that forces me to act, and obliges me to act. I have always already been obliged, it obliges me to act, and that action is action that I take in the hope of justice but without the guarantee of justice in a world that is by definition unjust.

NS Would every political decision or action, then risk, if not implement, a violence in that case?

SC It certainly risks a violence. The question, then, is how that violence is to be organized. The criticism that I still make of Derrida is that there isn't really an adequate theorization of violence.

NS Of the act of violence?

SC Well, what I mean by that is that politics is the instance of the decision, of an act, by definition an act of power, and a violent act. Politics is just that — it is a series of acts of violence, and that's nothing to be scared of. That's just the way it is. The term for that, say, in Laclau's work, borrowing from Gramsci, is hegemony, where politics concerns the hegemonization of social relations. What stops that simply being random is that those acts of violence have to be informed by some sort of criterion, which for me is an ethical criterion. Derrida is very good at now providing us with a very sophisticated account of that criterion where deconstruction is deconstruction in the name of justice. What it doesn't do is to connect that to a theory of hegemony as a theory of political action.

NS What happens to the postulate of the good in that case?

SC Well, the good is only good insofar as you can act upon it — and as you act upon it it will be the good at the service of the least worst. It has to be a politics of the least worst in any situation. One acts on the good in order to minimize what is a bad situation. Derrida is still weak on that point. To go back to the formalism charge, the risk in Derrida's work is a too easy universalism at times — for instance, in the remarks

on international law in *Specters of Marx* —, whereas what you would like to see is him getting his hands much dirtier in much more intractable political contexts. But he doesn't do that, that isn't what he does, but there are theoretical resources for thinking that, and Laclau would be the best I could think of.

NS *Very Little...Almost Nothing* is a poignant work informed by a more personal voice, if I may be permitted to say so. Did this have to do with a fundamental trauma? Moreover, in what way is it permissible, or important, for a philosophical discourse to respond to that which it cannot encapsulate?

SC It's a good question. You know, I basically published my PhD thesis four years later as the first book, and got lucky because it came out at the time of the Derrida affair. Derrida was in the national newspapers, books sold a lot, got reviewed, it seemed to be the right issue at the right time. I didn't want to write the same book again, 'Ethics of Deconstruction 2', at least not straightaway. *Very Little...Almost Nothing* came out of a series of other interests. The trauma was my dad dying, and life had collapsed in the way in which it can do, and I was trying to rethink a whole bundle of things. But also, I suppose, the way I came into philosophy was with the idea that the question of the meaning of life was a respectable question which had to be dealt with philosophically. I used to divide up my interests in two ways. I'd say, well, if philosophy begins in a disappointment of sorts, then that is a political disappointment and a religious disappointment. A political disappointment is disappointment that one is in a social world which is unjust, and that concerns how one can formulate the question of justice in a way that has some effectivity, that's one side. The other side of it is religious disappointment, which is disappointment about meaning, and how things mean something in the knowledge of the death of God, the nihilism problem in Nietzsche. So, the first book is a response to the political disappointment question, the second book is a response to religious disappointment. I've tried to bring this together a bit more now. The trauma is personal, but actually it is also a conceptual set of issues.

The last point about whether philosophical discourse has to respond to that which it cannot encapsulate has been an interest of mine for as long as I can remember. The other thing I wanted to write on was on poetry, and to write something on Beckett was an ambition I've had since I was about eighteen. The attraction of both those things is that they are impossible objects. Beckett's prose is a prose that sees the philosopher coming and trips the philosopher up, and that is the interesting thing about it, that is, what it is it to write on something which denies the meta-language that you're using to write in; and not only denies it, but can see it coming and has already parodied it.

JD Would you call *Very Little...Almost Nothing* a turning point?

SC I don't know. It's a bit embarrassing for some people because they don't really know what to make of it. It didn't sell as well as the first book, but generated different sorts of interest — it sold very well in the U.K. and got a different reception there. Books enable you to say something you couldn't before you write, and when that's written, then you wonder why it took so many words. Each book for me is not so much a turning point as focussing of my obsessions, an attempt to find a philosophical voice, or just a voice.

NS The image you worked with of a wounded male figure for the cover is disturbing. What led to that?

SC I had been doing some work with the arts students at Goldsmiths College. I got quite interested in that, and some of these students were producing images in relationship to some of the texts that I was producing. Goldsmiths art school is where the whole young British artists movement started, including Damien Hirst and Sam Taylor-Wood — these people all came out of the BA and MA programs. While I was teaching there I started to develop images and got more interested in those sets of questions, so in many ways the book fits into that basket of concepts. But to return to the wider point, that is, the sense in which being attracted by impossible objects as a philosophical activity is, I think, essential for me. Those objects for me have always been poetry and now, increasingly, music and humour. Whatever you say about any of those three things by definition is inadequate to the object, which is precisely why you are working with them in the first place. That could be seen in a sort of Adornian way, where philosophy becomes a form of attention to objects which, hopefully, allows people to attend to those objects; and then you forget that the conceptual discourse isn't as important as the object it is serving.

PB It's self-effacing.

SC Yes. The poet I've worked on the most and I continue to work on is Wallace Stevens, who for me is the greatest philosophical poet in English of the twentieth century — there's absolutely no question about that — and people ought to wake up to that fact a lot more. His voice is an exemplary meditative voice, a philosophical voice which is doing what it is doing in a non-philosophical form, in the form of poetic meditation. So, if my discourse or other people's discourse is just pointing people to those objects and saying 'Look', then that's fine. Of course it's even more difficult with music. I mean obviously the core thing about music is rhythm — how do you encapsulate rhythm in discourse? So an attraction to impossibility is nice. There is as an ethical imperative to that as well, in the sense that this is a philosophical discourse that should humble itself in the face of certain objects — not in a reverent way, but in a way which allows you to point to these things.

PB My question about that is, and it's not just to you, but to the whole milieu from which you're speaking, is that that is a very austere task, a very hard task. There is an austerity, and I would perhaps use a psychoanalytic term, or even a psychological term, and say that it is masochistic. Or it could be masochistic, or at least the question of masochism arises. I'm not saying that for you it is masochistic, but there is that question of what you're taking pleasure in, given the fact that you are constantly proving yourself to be inadequate.

SC It's a sort of heroic anti-heroism or virile impotence in the face of the object. That's true, and I think that there is an asceticism which is essential to these forms of mediation. To put it back in psychoanalytic terms, 'why does pleasure demand these detours?', 'why does pleasure demand these masochistic detours? — that there is a certain virtue to discipline, I suppose, would be the BD-SM version of the ethics of deconstruction.

NS The musicality, rhythm, poetics, and the lightness of Nietzsche seem a different response to that exigency.

SC Well, I see Nietzsche as a much more troubled soul than that. I think that is what he would like — Nietzsche would like to dance and have lightness, but he doesn't, he's a cake eating, neurotic German philologist who can't be all of those things, whose prose is inhabited by the way in which that desire paralyzes him in the end. I think in many ways you should give up the Promethean ambition to transform yourself in the way in which Nietzsche did. I mean, Nietzsche is a thinker in the Christian tradition, but he doesn't want to be — that's why his real sibling is St. Paul. That's part of why Nietzsche is close to St Paul in terms of the tone of his discourse, and that is precisely what Nietzsche has to deny and hate.

NS In *Very Little...Almost Nothing*, you engaged with the question of humour in Beckett and the production of an autonomy effected through what you call a "weak messianic power", one whose antithetical and paradoxical significative intensities are not identified with a redemptive politics or ethos, but which by virtue of their 'weakness' remain open to a radical finitude. In what way would you differentiate a weak finitude from a strong finitude, for example, if we were to cite Heidegger, of an authentic anticipation of *Dasein* towards its death, that is, the possibility of its impossibility?

SC It's an interesting question, one I would want to link with the question of the significance of finitude as being tied to nihilism. That is, when talking about meaningless as an achievement, how can that be differentiated from a non-reactive nihilism or hopelessness. The problematic here is a Heideggerian problematic — that modern times are nihilistic times, God is dead, and the problem of meaning looms large. If for Paul or Augustine the lever against which religious conversion was this transcendent point outside of human existence against which the meaning of my death could be measured, then obviously for Heidegger as an atheistic thinker (which he is from 1919 onwards, rigorously atheistic, despite what he says later on), the only point of leverage is going to be the experience of my finitude as such without reference to anything outside, because there can be no transcendence outside my finitude. So finitude becomes the wall or the bulwark in the face of which I give myself meaning. The risk of that is the risk of Prometheanism in Heidegger, or heroism — that in the face of a meaningless world, of *das Man* and the They, I can achieve authenticity by internalizing the meaning of my death as such. And on the basis of internalizing the meaning of my death I can imagine a community, and the name Heidegger gives to internalizing the meaning of my death is 'fate'. Who knows what he is thinking of, but it is easy to think of, say, Oedipus in that connection who takes on the meaning of his death and assumes his fate. I can do that collectively, and Heidegger calls that destiny. Destiny is attached to the notion of the people in paragraph 74b in *Sein und Zeit* and, as Lacoue-Labarthe has shown, and Nancy too, the logic of *Being and Time* ends up with a certain authentic unity as only conceivable on the basis of the people.

PB He also talks about the hero.

SC Yes, hence the commitment to National Socialism in 1933 — there is a systematic connection between Heidegger's philosophy and his politics. That's my understanding of Heidegger. There are other ways of liberating thoughts within the early Heidegger, and Nancy is trying to do that. I'm writing a book on the early Heidegger, amongst other things, where I try to free the notion of inauthenticity and facticity from these determinations, but that's the Heideggerian story. Then, how one is

to think the question of finitude, given the question of the meaning of life for moderns, becomes the question of finitude outside that Heideggerian framework. The model that I try sketching in various forms in that book is what you can call a weak finitude, or a finitude where the relationship to my death is an impossible relationship that I cannot affirm, I cannot internalize it, and where death becomes the impossibility of possibility, not the possibility of impossibility. Obviously, the major example of that is the work of Blanchot.

There's a truth to Heidegger, as always, that we live in dark times, that what Heidegger sees in National Socialism is the possibility of a political movement that would overthrow nihilism, as Ernst Jünger saw, and as Carl Schmitt more cynically saw. There's a possible link between an existential transformation and a social-political transformation through a strong notion of finitude. A weak notion of finitude does end up in a form of hopelessness. Now, there's another aspect to this story, which is that for the later Heidegger and Adorno, and this is summarizing huge stretches of argument, what has to be given up is the desire to overcome nihilism, the desire to overcome as such. For Heidegger, the question of metaphysics is a question in which ultimately we have to overcome the desire to overcome metaphysics, and leave metaphysics to itself. Adorno says that all acts of overcoming are worse than what they overcome; that's more of a Burkean thought here in Adorno. The thought in the later Heidegger and Adorno is connected by overcoming overcoming and assuming a different stance, one which Heidegger calls releasement, and which Adorno calls non-identity thinking or a form of micrology, attentiveness to objects. We live in dark times, but the way in which we confront that is by giving up this Promethean desire, this heroic desire to overcome, so that we can try and redescribe the social situation that we are in. Now, the interest in humour is that humour for me is an exemplary social practice which shows a fundamentally weak notion of finitude, a fundamental inauthenticity.

PB So that's Seinfeld.

SC That's Seinfeld, that's right, 'look to the cookie', as Seinfeld says. The thing is that the model of transformation, the aesthetic model of transformation for post-Kantian philosophy, from Schelling onwards, is the model of the tragic, overwhelmingly the model of the tragic. I just try to ask the question, 'what would change if you began from the notion of the comic or the humorous, how does that whole picture have to change?' I think that is an interesting thought.

JD How weak is weak? If you take the finitude of the 'subject', or of *Dasein*, it remains a terribly important and perhaps the most significant question in Heidegger. It's not just our death — it's also our birth as well — this finite limit and span of time is the condition upon which existence is meaningful for us. To understand this requires an effort to get away from an 'everydayness' to some other kind of stance, to a philosophical stance.

SC Or a reflective stance. Yes. That's why Heidegger says that *Dasein* must choose its hero in two occasions in *Being and Time*. That's why I choose Beckett as my hero, if you like — Beckett is my hero, insofar as Beckett's work is characterized by a supreme effort, which Badiou calls courage. The defining quality of Beckett's work is courage, but it's actually political courage as well in Beckett's life, in terms of what he actually did, his tremendous acts of personal courage, for which he received the *Croix de Guerre* from General de Gaulle in 1969.

The question of a weak finitude and effort is linked with the hero of Beckett: ‘try again fail again, fail better’. That’s the logic of it. It’s weak in the sense in which there is going to be no identity between my project of thought and its achievement in the world. The idea of a work, which is the idea which you find from the Romantics onwards, as a political aspiration of an aesthetic ideology is given up. That doesn’t mean that effort is given up, since effort is intensified as an effort which is a genuine endurance. But it is weak insofar as it would not, it does not, result in a work, and gives up the aspiration that there could be a work at the end of this process. So that’s Beckett — Beckett is a political thinker in that sense.

NS There is an echo of Vattimo and his work on weak ontology.

SC Well, the weak is not the weak innocent, the weak isn’t *il pensiero debilo*, which is the Italian phrase — that we can’t have strong ontological commitments anymore because we’re post-metaphysical, and therefore have to make do with weak ontological commitments. I think that’s rubbish in all of its manifestations — it’s in Vattimo, it’s also in Habermas in different ways, the idea that we are really in a post-metaphysical age. The whole emphasis in political philosophy on the weak and the thin, on thin notions of the good. I think, however, that philosophy is in the business of making things as thick and strong as possible in that sense. In the context of finitude I would think about Beckett as an example again. Beckett’s strength is a strength of weakness, which is actually the movement of his prose, what he calls a “syntax of weakness” — ‘live, invent, live isn’t the word, neither is invent, never mind’, Beckett would have said. That syntax of weakness becomes exemplary for a whole number of practices. The interest in humour, again, is that humour is an exemplary form of a syntax of weakness, which is a strong experience of failure.

PB A lot of people are celebrating that as being some sort of response to certain kinds of existential conditions. What for me is questionable — although, of course I can see what you’re saying with that question — is that humour is duplicitous. The Nazis had humour, they had irony. Some of the most grotesque things that they did were also undertaken in the spirit of irony and humour. That’s something that Lanzmann brings out in his documentary. I think that if you’re going to look at humour seriously, in a serious philosophical way, it’s necessary to account for the fact that it is ambiguous, and that it is open in its possible effects. I don’t think it’s enough to say that humour is the exemplary model of a response to a political condition.

SC That’s quite right. And also humour is radically contextual as well, which makes it even more troubled insofar as what works here as a joke wouldn’t work somewhere else, and might even offend in some ways. I’m writing a little book on humour, and chapter four ends up having to make a normative argument for humour. The backdrop against which I have to make that distinction, that claim for a normative notion of humour, is the fact that humour is radically duplicitous, and its exemplary status is just in that. The normative claim I want to make is that good humour is laughing at yourself, while bad humour is laughing at others. The humour which laugh at other’s misfortune I would want to criticize, obviously, but you can’t say that it is not humorous, and you can’t say that it doesn’t happen. I’d want to say, furthermore, that it actually reveals something painfully interesting about who we are — the fact, for example, that if someone comes in the door and trips up and falls over I laugh. The feeling of superiority that I have over him as I laugh is why Hobbes calls humour “that nameless passion” —

there's a powerful truth to that. And that's the logic of racist humour and sexist humour, it's that I laugh at another's misfortune — what makes me feel stronger. It's important to be reminded of that. That's the way it works.

NS Is humour a kind of a self-reflexive tragedy in that sense? On your reading, the big problem with tragedy is that it's not tragic enough. Comedy is the acknowledgment of that failure.

SC Yes. The problem with tragedy is that tragedy, based on the model that I tend to work with, is thought on the model of reconciliation, or of the assumption of one's being towards death in Heidegger or in Lacan — there's a kind of authenticity in tragedy. Comedy is about the divestment of one's authenticity, insofar as one is always led back into the world that one would rather not be part of obviously, which is a world of one's prejudices, and that that just follows you around. Humour is a way in which that follows you around, what you laugh at is in many ways a memory of the person you are but rather not be. So, in that sense, racist humour, for example, is incredibly illuminating negatively in terms of who one is. I mean, I could be a non-racist and laugh at racist jokes in a sort of little agony.

NS Following Derrida in "Violence and Metaphysics," the ethical community announces itself in the community of the question and the decision, a community which is not, however, secured, but which is always already threatened. Such a community, as Derrida expresses it in this passage, is "very little — almost nothing (*C'est peu — ce n'est presque rien*) — but within it, today, is sheltered and encapsulated an unbreachable dignity and duty of decision." What did you want to say in your second work with this title, this citation, what does it promise for you in a more general sense?

PB And if I could just add to this question, I noticed that the subtitle in your work is "death, philosophy, literature." Are they very little, almost nothing?

SC That subtitle came from the publishers. I wanted the book to be 'Very Little...Almost Nothing', with nothing, not even my name, on the cover, but on the back, but the publisher wouldn't have it and insisted on a subtitle. So that's why it's subtitled. I don't like the subtitle. But the phrase 'very little, almost nothing' just kept cropping up in my writing on Romanticism and just kept reoccurring. It is not a direct citation from that opening paragraph of "Violence and Metaphysics," which I can remember reading in a laundrette in Colchester in about 1982. The first time I read Derrida was in the communist students' reading group. It was bizarre, because they were all Althusserians but had become fedup with Althusser. They had been working through Foucault and then had gone on to Derrida. We were reading that paragraph in particular. In the laundrette — I can still remember it now — I thought that this was tremendously important, re-reading it over and over again, without quite knowing what it meant.

The key issue of the question of the possibility of the question is that community is a community that would be the imagined community of Derrida's own work — which would be a community sheltered by an unbreachable dignity in the duty of decision, one in which the question of community is thought in relationship to some unbreachable duty or responsibility. The question then is whether the notion of the subject that I'm defending ends up in a singular hero of ethical decision — how can there be a shared experience of the ethical demand? The subject is not necessarily an individual. A

subject could be an individual subject, but it could also be the name for a collectivity. It's the old Althusserian or Badiouian response to that — the subject is a name for a process and a power. The question is how a subject binds itself to an event, pledges itself to an event, and constitutes itself. That subject could be the individual subject of St. Paul on the road to Damascus, it could be the collective subject of a political party, or an aesthetic movement, or whatever, or a football team. It could be any of those things, so in that sense the notion of the subject, for me, implies a notion of community, or a notion of commonality. It doesn't exclude that. The question of hegemony in my work would be how hegemony would be a political theory of subject constitution, of how you would produce collective subjects. Again, the genius of St. Paul is that you begin with this individual subject defining itself in relationship to an event, the resurrection of Christ, which then produces the political community of Christianity, the Church. For someone like Badiou, I think, rightly, that becomes exemplary for political action. Political action is how you make subjects like that — I tend to agree. For one to be a subject as a collective subject still means that one has to approve of a demand in a certain sense — it's not just an individual approval, it could be a collective approval.

NS It's a demand which you said comes from the other. This decision and this demand is not your own. If I could raise another question, you have criticized Lévinas both for the linkage of God to the ethical, and for a politics that would determine the border of the other with a particular state or polity. How would an atheist and deconstructive ethics of finitude respond to a presentation of the illiminable, preserving even this difference, which for Lévinas is immemorially identified with the *agathon epekeina tês ousias*, the Good beyond Being? To ask this question in a slightly different way, what grounds or guarantees the quasi-phenomenological account of radical alterity in its suspension of a metaphysical ethics?

SC Lévinas is trying to think a notion of otherness which won't return to the same. That's the fundamental concern of his thought. Forms of otherness that do return to the same are what he calls ontology. Ethics would be a relationship to an other that remained other from a same or a self that remained a self. From 1963 onwards, I think, in "Trace of the Other" and then in "Meaning and Sense" Lévinas goes back to that question and becomes convinced that the only way in which he can guarantee a form of ethical thinking that won't return to the self is by not just relating to the human other, but by making the human other relate to something beyond itself, what he calls the trace of *illegality*, or the divine, or God. So, in order for the ethical relation to take place there has to be a theological given in some way, even if that theological given is given through the account of the other human. That seems to be what Lévinas is arguing.

Now, I think that's implausible because God is dead. There is a real tension between the phenomenological and metaphysical aspects of Lévinas' thought. There's a phenomenology of alterity which is wonderful. Lévinas thinks that in order to guarantee that that phenomenology of alterity is ethical that there has to be a metaphysical datum, which is God; unless we read the metaphysics out of Lévinas' phenomenology, in which case that raises the question of what is going to stop me falling back into the problem that Lévinas thinks he's trying to solve with his metaphysics. So, for me the guarantee for this phenomenological account, one which doesn't fall back into the theological metaphysics, comes through a theory of the subject. Since the condition of possibility for the ethical relation to the other is a certain disposition within the subject, which I think you can find in Lévinas' later work in his account of trauma and hostage, the question of the subject becomes the key question. In thinking this question of the

subject in ways which will make that thought more powerful I was led to a psychoanalytic discourse of the subject as a way of thinking that through. The only answer I can give is that an atheist and deconstructive ethics of finitude has to base its ethical claims on a theory of the subject, one where the subject is defined by what Derrida calls “the other’s decision in me.” There is a demand within me which constitutes me as such, there is, as it were, an alterity inside.

NS This is indeterminate.

SC It’s, no, it’s determinate insofar as I can locate it in theories like guilt. I can determine it in specific ways, but where it comes from could be questionable. Then you’re into an interesting different theological issue — the Christian subject, for someone like Badiou or Žižek, where he takes this up in his recent work, this Christian subject is a subject that comes into being at the same time as the event which defines it. St. Paul, on the road to Damascus, experiences the event of the resurrection of Christ as an event, and his subjectivity is born at that moment, as it were, *ex nihilo*. For the Jew, in a sense there is an infinite anteriority to the event that constitutes the subject. I am always already defined by a traumatic identification that makes me what I am. Where that works its way through in Lévinas is by the emphasis on the trace as the trace of an unassumable past.

NS It is nevertheless positive insofar as it is an election, and the reason why you are a chosen people. You’re not a people in alterable difference from an other — you’re elected to this position.

SC What are you chosen for? You’re chosen to suffer. That’s what the Jews were chosen to do. And Lévinas, in a sense, goes along with that. So, election, chosenness is the cause of anti-Semitism — it’s because the Jews were chosen that they’re persecuted. They’re the only hope on earth, that’s why they’re exterminated. I want to try and give a psychoanalytic cadence to that discourse of the trace and the past. I think you can read Freud consistently in that way. That theory of the subject is grounded in its radical alterity, and in particular a psychoanalytically formed phenomenology.

PB In Derrida, the subject never manages to constitute itself, and I think that is one of the reasons why he is quite reticent to talk about the subject, and when he is finally pinned down by Jean-Luc Nancy, he’ll say something like the subject is a pause. The reason why the subject never constitutes itself is precisely its relation to an alterity, but to an alterity that is always in movement, what he calls “*differance* with an a.” The subject doesn’t have a relationship to itself before difference with an ‘a’, which means that it’s in this incessant altering of self all the time. What troubles me about this sort of formulation, like the one you said before, deconstructive ethics and finitude, the return to a theoretical subject, is that...

SC It’s not deconstructive.

PB Well, yes. Derrida’s thinking about the subject goes through Heidegger’s — to attend, as it were, to the finitude of others in inverted commas, the commas that a different subject has been based in, or too heavily invested in a thinking of being as presence-at-hand in a kind of substantialism. This is why he tries to use the word

Dasein, other than the subject, which is an entity but doesn't actually have a substantive ground, but is grounded in nothingness.

SC That's all true in the sense in which the notion of the subject as I have formulated it would be consistent with Heidegger's critique of any substantial notion of the subject. It's unclear in the history of subjectivity who actually believes in the substantive theory of the subject, and the closer you look the more difficult it is to work it out. Someone like Michel Henry has criticised Heidegger's reading of Descartes for attributing all sorts of substantialist fantasies to the notion of the thinking substance of the *res cogitans*. Certainly, for Kant the subject is *Dasein*, it's a *cogito* without an *ergo sum*, it's just an 'I think', it's not a substance. So, I'm obviously thinking in that way. I suppose Derrida's hesitations are too Heideggerian in a way, at times, there is perhaps too much hesitation, and that's always frustrated me in Derrida's work, and in particular in followers of Derrida; which is less the case now, but ten years ago hesitation was a sort of growth industry, and you could listen to endless papers for ever in which nothing would be said in the most elegant way. There's a sort of a bloody mindedness in me that wants to say, well, you've got to determine at some point, you've got to come up with a concept. What you say is right. Derrida wouldn't ever go that far. But I still want to say that Derrida should go further, but I think there is more, still more determination than he's prepared to say, which is what I like about a very anti-Derridean thinker like Badiou, is that Badiou who, in his sort of cheerful bludgeoning way, just comes up with new concepts.

NS But you've said that he's too heroic.

SC Yes, there's a heroism of Badiou's, the heroism of the militant, which I think is a problem. But it's a refreshing antidote to all that hesitation.

NS One defence, though, is to the relationship of philosophy, phenomenology, and alterity to the divine. And perhaps even — one could conceive of this — to what could be viewed as a defence of a religious perspective; that is, of another alterable difference as an other ethical connection that was permissible.

SC Yes, but how religious would that be, what would that religion mean?

NS Well, the defence of the good beyond being, for instance.

SC Yes, see, I'm very hard on that. There has been a theological turn in French phenomenology as Dominique Janicaud, the supervisor of my *Maîtrise de Philosophie*, would say, there's a risk that phenomenology ends up at the service of certain theological data. I think that risk is at its most extreme in the work of Jean-Luc Marion, which I think is a redundant formalism, and which is at the service of a reactionary Catholicism, for what it's worth. I would want to take phenomenology in precisely the other direction, which is the direction that someone like Sartre and Merleau-Ponty were interested in all those generations ago.

NS And, too, the return to Catholicism in Vattimo with *Belief*?

SC I can see why it goes on, and I think it's a cop-out. Philosophical modernity for me is about the question of secularization, as it is for a lot of other people. The problem

of secularization is that secularization is a problem. God is dead, and yet we still inhabit theological modes and habits of thinking, and not simply by virtue of tradition and custom, there's a power to that. So the way I try to formulate it is that philosophy is inconceivable with religion, and inconceivable without religion. That's the knife edge that we're on, and I think that Nietzsche performs that, that's his brilliance, that we can no longer give ourselves the belief that former generations gave themselves. And yet we cannot believe the stories that we would like to tell ourselves.

NS In a sense we're part of that problem, that tendency to move towards the theological. Does this drive your response to, and your engagement with, what Blanchot names *le neutre*?

SC Yes, it would be what I would call an experience of atheist transcendence. The best expression of it is that scene in Blanchot's writing of the disaster when the child looks up at the night sky and the sky becomes a sky without stars. It starts to cry and its parents try to console the child, but it's inconsolable; but eventually the child stops crying and learns that this is the secret, that this is the secret. That would be the experience of the neuter — it's an experience of the transcendence of the starry heavens, but it's a disastrous transcendence, it's not one which has any plenitude in it. But it's still a transcendence, it's an atheist one.

NS That's *thaumazein*, or the wonder of finitude.

SC It's a wonder, yes! Philosophy for the Greeks begins in *thaumazein*, but you know the old joke: Greek philosophy begins in wonder, Jewish philosophy begins in worry. You could say Blanchot begins in horror, or something like that.

PB There's an expression that he uses in that passage, "a vertiginous knowledge that nothing is what there is."

SC Yes, nothing is what there is.

PB "And first of all nothing beyond," "*Rien est ce qu'il y a.*" And then you've got a commentary on it later on in the book, and he says, "no, you will translate this as 'there is nothing', but it's not 'there is nothing', it's 'nothing is what there is'." It's like a wave of being and nothingness arriving, constantly washing over one.

SC But the thing is that Romanticism is our naïveté, put it that way. Our naïveté is the belief that thought can connect with the deep core of human existence and that human existence can be transformed in complete and powerful ways — and we're still naïve enough to believe that thought, and I think rightly. But we know it's a thought that we can't believe, and that's the problem: we know that we require myth, but we know that it's myth. You could then say, and this is something someone like Blanchot would say, that literature is myth that knows itself as myth, and that's what we need. So that's doing that role. Now, he wouldn't though.

JD You say that ethical subjectivity is comic rather than tragic, that humour is akin to depression (in Freud's sense) as a minimal sublimation that is 'liberating and elevating'. How do you distinguish your thinking of humour and the comic as an 'acknowledgment of finitude' from Bataille's excessive laughter and Rorty's liberal

irony, both of which take up a rapport to death and chance? And what makes you laugh, or become depressed, about philosophy today? Or politics?

SC Nothing is funnier than unhappiness, Beckett's, so that's one. What makes me laugh is the human comedy, but obviously in a contextually specific way. What makes you laugh is what makes you laugh wherever you are and its restraints. What makes you laugh has to do with the experience of your own language, in the place where you are. I mean, humour is nostalgic in all sorts of ways, powerfully, and what makes you laugh in many ways draws you back to that past in unpleasant ways. You experience your rootedness in a way really you would much rather not be rooted in. So that in many ways I would inhabit, for example, whatever Englishness means — humour would be a way of doing that, but that's not at all sanguine, it's not unpleasant.

The stereotype I've got of Bataille's laughter is that it's the laughter of the mountain tops, it's laughter of excess and transgression, and laughter of the limits of one's being, which I see as an authentic laughter in a way. Rorty's laughter is sardonic, it is a laughter which has given up in the face of things. So for me it's somewhere in-between the two, it's a laughter which gives up in excessive ways. Beckett would be the great example. Beckett's characters are always giving up and then carrying on, right, so in *Godot* what's funny is that they try to kill themselves and they can't, but they keep trying. They don't give up. So, there's still something to be achieved.

I think that humour is akin to depression — this is a thought I'm trying to develop. The superego gets a bad press in a lot of psychoanalytic literature. In Lacan it gets a very bad press, and in a lot of discourses around the ethics of psychoanalysis. The superego is the source of the hostility which is blocking the ego and feeding it its symptom to itself. Psychoanalysis works by the analyst assuming the place of the superego, reducing the hostility and transferring the hostility onto the analyst in the form of love in transference, and then, hopefully, the symptom will be alleviated or moved on. That's all true. Psychoanalysis is dealing with the superego in the actual analytic situation. What Freud says about humour in the 1927 essay is that humour is the contribution made to the comic by the superego. The thought I am trying to develop is that in Freud the superego finally has a positive function. On this model there is a superego 1 and a superego 2: a childish superego, which is the superego that is hostile and which generates symptoms, and superego 2, which would be the superego of humour, a mature or adult superego where I realize that I am ridiculous, where I can look outside myself and criticize myself, find myself ridiculous and laugh at it.

Jokes come from the unconscious, whereas humour comes from the superego, that's the situation. You've got the comic and then you've got the contribution that jokes make to the comic because of the unconscious. The contribution that humour makes to the comic is the superego. So, jokes are, in that sense, always thought of in terms of unconscious slips. Which, again, isn't wrong at all, but in many ways what you are saying is that the duplicity of humour could be thought of in terms of the unconscious versus the superego. Jokes have a relationship to the unconscious, and the unconscious that is our unconscious is an unconscious with hatred or domination, that's all there, so if I laugh too heartily at homophobic jokes that might be an unconscious symptom of the repression of my homosexuality. That's the way the analyst reads the joke. The other side of the comic is the superego which produces humour when it is entirely conscious — in Freud's example, I look up at the hanging of the condemned man who walks out on the morning of his execution, he looks up at the sky and says, 'Well, the weeks are becoming nicer'. I look at myself and I cite myself, I find myself ridiculous, and I laugh. To do that requires a maturity to a degree. But what's interesting

there is that that's exactly the same structure as the structure of depression in Freud. The structure of depression in Freud is that the subject is split between itself and an object that it cannot assume.

PB A little like melancholy.

SC Yes, melancholy is this relation to a thing which shadows my ego. There's a melancholy 1, as it were, where I am depressed by my thing, whatever that is. Melancholy 2 would be where I realize my thing as my thing and the depression is, at least, managed in some way.

JD To come back to Bataille — where Bataille talks about laughter, he's talking about sovereignty. And, of course, it's too much, it's excessive, so laughter is a response. With Rorty, however, there's a refusal to laugh, it's to pacify, it's deflationary. I'm sure that many readers have an incredulity toward Rorty's 'irony', in that it's a way of not laughing.

SC I never found Bataille that funny, to be perfectly honest. I mean, I have to go back and look at it. Rorty is a passive nihilist on my account, so to laugh with him is to experience that giving up — it's a 'don't worry be happy' laughter in that sense. The problem is that Rorty is very funny sometimes. I think that Rorty is a wonderful prose stylist and there's nothing he says which is uninteresting, I think everything Rorty says is interesting. I've read everything by Rorty because I think that it's interesting, and not out of any sense of duty. But I always find that he'll say something unpleasant or that will piss people off in new and interesting ways — and that's good. As much as I hate him, that's why I have to go back to him and have a look.

JD Where you say that for ethics to be possible, you argue that the subject must approve of a demand that seeks approval. We may say, then, that this demand is shared as much as it is assumed uniquely. Our ethics, politics, decisions, and responsibilities take place socially and materially. Can we, then, continue to think ethics on the model of the 'subject and the other', which may still presuppose the singular hero of ethical decision? Should we — or can we — move beyond this model to think the place and experience of community or, more precisely, *democracy* as a shared experience of the ethical demand? Perhaps you could say more about this?

SC Well, I've tried to answer the question of whether there's a sort of methodological individualism to my approach. I get round it by saying the subject is trans-individual — but the Lévinasianism is a problem because Lévinas' appeal, like Kierkegaard's arguments, work through the appeal to the individual.

NS That's interesting because he criticizes Kierkegaard vehemently precisely for privileging the individual. That would have to be tied to Lévinas' insistence that he explicitly does not privilege or identify the individual.

SC That's true, but I think that Lévinas and Kierkegaard share an enemy in terms of Hegel.

NS But at least Kierkegaard is extraordinarily funny and deflationary.

SC Good God, he's extraordinarily funny, absolutely. The way Kierkegaard's anti-Hegelian comedy works is by ridiculing the pretension that an individual could have to becoming world spirits or that sort of spirit, and Kierkegaard reminds the individual that he or she is an individual. Lévinas disagrees with that and gives us different forms of subjectivity. But the claim of Lévinas' work is a claim to individuality, it's a way of saying — and this is something that Derrida brings out brilliantly in his 1980 essay, "At this very moment in this work here I am" — 'here I am'. What is being called for is a response, which is a response of an I in some sense, and in its weakness, in the fact that it cannot produce or turn this into a system — there isn't a philosophical overview, a *survol de pensée*, as Meleau-Ponty would put it, so in that sense there is a sort of individualism, but a minimal one.

NS In a sense, would it be fair to say, following Lévinas, that your individuality is granted to you in part from the other?

SC Yes. You are reminded of the individual that you are in the face of the other, which I think is phenomenologically right. For example, someone makes an ethical demand on you on Glebe Point Rd and you either pass them by or you don't. Both ways the demand is being registered on you as a specific individual, and perhaps even in passing by the demand is more attentive, you feel your callousness and inadequacy.

But how does this relate to democracy? Democracy is privileged, for me, insofar as democracy would be a political form of society that would be aware of its political status — the most politically self-conscious form of society. That means that, obviously, in Machiavelli and in Hobbes, and the princes they were advising were aware of the contingency of the political situation, that politics is made through violence and power. Making, in Machiavelli's phrase, a virtue out of necessity. But that wasn't extended to the people, the people couldn't be self-conscious of that contingency. So democracy, for me, is defined by the contingency of the political as something which is shared and which defines what it is to be a citizen, so that to be a citizen in a democracy is to be aware of the thoroughly political character of that life as a condition for action and participation. The problem with most democracy is that most democracies are founded on a lie, which is a lie that they naturalize themselves, essentialize themselves, in terms of tradition's histories — the American way of life, or the liberties of Englishman, whatever it is, or even merely a different myth of the French Revolution. So in that sense democracy is a fundamental political form of society. The task of philosophy, as I see it, is making that experience of that self-consciousness of contingency more accurate, of bringing people some awareness of that. The political problem is how one can combine some sort of ethical criterion with that political space.

NS This is what you express as the deduction of the political from the ethical?

SC Yes, that's right. How do you get from one to the other. Again, the move towards Derrida in the last few years, which is really a move which has just been following his work, is that there has to be a connection between ethics and politics, but we cannot deduce politics from ethics in the way in which Lévinas would seem to want to do with the notion of the third party. There is a hiatus between ethics and politics, so what do we do, how do we get from one to the other? Well, The response would be that politics is an act of invention of something which is radically specific. You invent norms and then act on them, and then that invention is radically specific, context

specific, but that invention isn't just arbitrary invention, it's invention which is based upon some ethical criterion which Derrida has called justice.

NS That sounds incredibly like Lyotard's work, and which also informs Derrida's thinking.

SC It's true actually, yes, now you mention it. In the early Lyotard there is simply the differend, an experience of the difference of language games without any possibility of communication, discourse ethics, or whatever. In the late Lyotard of *Heidegger and 'the jews'*, Auschwitz then becomes the name of an absolute differend which, in a sense, generates an ethical criterion for Lyotard, which then becomes the legend of '*les juifs*', 'the jews', which is the location for this always forgotten demand in our experience, and which pushes me into ethical action. So it's quite similar to Lyotard

NS There is a strong reading of Lévinas, then, in Lyotard.

SC Yes. I think Lyotard's reading of Lévinas is very interesting because the first essay, "Lévinas' Logic," is a critique of Lévinas' modelling, prescriptives, and descriptives.

NS It's also an unfaithful critique. Lyotard acknowledges that he performs his critique in bad faith because any notion or concept of performing a critique in good faith of another text, or discourse, immediately falls prey to the problem of incorporating that logic within the logic of the Same, and so Lyotard says at the very beginning of that paper that his critique will inevitably engage in an act of bad faith, with an act of betrayal almost, of reading Lévinas; and yet, foregrounding that, identifying that, precisely involves an ethical bind and the invention of the other again.

SC Yes, that's absolutely right. But don't you think that there's a shift in Lyotard's work between that and something like *Heidegger and 'the jews'*?

NS Yes, and that would be to talk of his work in terms of driftworks, of drafts.

SC Yes.

NS And also of momentarily having the case. There are close resonances to Derrida, which together could be made with a reading of Lyotard and Lévinas. At the same time, there is a unifying trajectory to Lyotard's work from *Libidinal Economy*, to what in a sense also prefigures *Libidinal Economy*, to his later works.

SC This is always the criticism that is made of him though, isn't it?

NS Yes. But Lyotard constantly grapples with the political and the subject. I mean, at least with *Libidinal Economy*, his intent is to resist a unifying logic and to try and come up with another operation, another intervention.

SC Yes, right, that's good.

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Contretemps, 1: September 2000