
A Poetics of Event and Change

Review of *Poetics and Justice in America, Japan, and Taiwan: Configuring Change and Entitlement*, by Dean Anthony Brink (London: Lexington Books, 2021)

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Poetics and Justice in America, Japan, and Taiwan: Configuring Change and Entitlement is Dean Anthony Brink's latest contribution to the study of intertextuality and the relevance of poetry to politics. To a certain extent, *Poetics and Justice* recalls what Brink has touched on in his previous book, *Japanese Poetry and Its Publics: From Colonial Taiwan to Fukushima* (2018). In the new book, he reasserts the importance of intertextuality, referring it, as he did previously, to Alain Badiou's conception of a poem as a body or configuration, or as what connects an assortment of discourses (literary or social, conventional or contemporary) and names the unrecognizable event, thereby enabling change. That said, it should be noted that in *Poetics and Justice* Brink also updates his methodology: not only does the volume address poems of a greater variety of linguistic and cultural backgrounds and cite Badiou as a principal inspiration, Brink also recasts the Badiouian terminology, inventing concepts (such as "micro-event," "after-event," and "interevent") and seeing them as what better reflects the political significance of poetry. In this sense, *Poetics* reads more like an engagement with Badiou's notions of event and change. It is as such a poetics of event and change.

Poetics and Justice is divided into four parts (with each comprising one to four chapters), plus an introduction and a helpful glossary. In the Introduction, Brink clarifies his purpose of writing the new book: he plans to inquire into the

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possibility of “defending a Badiouian approach to literary and cultural studies” and adopting “a compelling means of adapting Badiou’s evental theory to literary and cultural studies” (3). The dual objective is primarily attended to by Brink’s argument that poems, insofar as they appropriate the conventional and popular discourses for their phrasings, constitute intertexts that not only interconnect but, more importantly, reconfigure the (pre-)existing linguistic uses. In addition, he maintains that poems are able to foreground what remains obscure and even suppressed in the predominant opinions, such as those voiced by the State or the media. Either way, a poetic (inter-)text marks a discontinuity in the domain of the sensible and amounts to a confirmation of some unidentified event, mainly by indexing and admitting retroactively the latter’s occurrence. In other words, a poetic intertext suggests a truth (also called a “truth procedure” or a “truth-multiple” in Badiou’s writings) produced *post-eventally*.

Brink’s emphasis on the status and function of a poem as a piece of intertextuality, taken either “formally or socially” (9), sheds light on his reinvention of Badiou. This is best illustrated by the intertwining of the aesthetic and the political in *Poetics and Justice*. For Badiou, art and politics designate two of the four types of post-evental truth conditions (science and love being the other two) (*Being and Event* 339-40). While he does once mention the overlap of art and love in novels (*Conditions* 180), suggesting the likelihood of coupling the four truth conditions, he does not explore much other combinations. Brink’s understanding of poetic intertexts as formal and sociopolitical reconfigurations draws attention to the intersection of art and politics, thus highlighting the “political potency” of poetry (13). More specifically, Brink holds that poems can attain their political efficacy in two ways: “either [by] altering the form of poetry, by way of heretofore unknown method invested in it, or by bringing to poetry an appearance which alters how we understand . . . the world” (9). This means that “[p]oetry need not be sociopolitically engaged in the sense of wearing its activist badge on its shoulder” (9). Rather, poetic (inter)texts are already political as long as they introduce a different, hitherto unknown way of seeing the world and hence an alternative form of being, an innovative mode of perception and existence understood aesthetically or sociopolitically.

It is this aesthetico-political principle that best accounts for Brink’s selection of the poems studied in *Poetics and Justice*. Part I treats ecopoetry (rather than nature writing) as what is truly political: though adopting the received tropes of nature writing, ecopoems are better at articulating “the current ecological issues” as the unacknowledged events and thus more capable of “transform[ing] perception and knowledge by finding ways of presenting them in ontological fresh

configurations” (41). Part II shifts attention to Japanese poetry, especially “current events *senryū*” and “*tanka*,” two modernized poetic forms that allude to both pre-modern and popular discourses and “contemporary historical events” (59). Works from the Almighty *Senryū* column of the *Mainichi shimbun* and by Hai Hasegawa or Tawara Machi embody Brink’s conception of intertextual poems as filled with aesthetic and political agency: these poetic intertexts revamp the function of the classical and contemporary languages and posit, for instance, the Fukushima Natural Disaster as an event overshadowed in media reports by the rhetoric of neoliberalism and consumerism.

Part III takes into account several American poets and performers, including Amiri Baraka, Sun Ra, John Cage, Rodrigo Toscano, and John Ashbery. While their works differ in style and political agendas, they share in the attempt to challenge the norms of existence and perception and to provide an alternative mode of being and seeing. For example, both the poems of Baraka and Sun Ra deal with racial equality as the event disregarded in the United States and imagine a world that does not reiterate the essentialized, binarized understanding of race. Cage’s and Toscano’s poetry performances contest the given rules of art, with their experimental employment of conventional musical and poetic techniques reshaping the very idea of art and author in relation to the audience. Although tinged with a sense of isolation from people, Ashbery’s poetics renders the poetic self as “always engaging others” and “multifarious situations” (221), turning the tradition of poets’ self-indulgence into what enables social connections. The last part of *Poetics and Justice* returns to Asian writers, with the focus placed on Taiwanese artist Hung Hung, Malaysian-American poet Justin Chin, and Japanese *tanka* writer Ishii Tatsuhiko. What Brinks underscores in his reading of these authors is the same: their creations question the oppressive geopolitical, ethnic, and sexual forms of identity and make visible the minor positions in society through their reconfiguration of social relations and intertextual engagement with works from other cultural backgrounds.

With the observation that the political force of poetry derives from its criticism of the predominant forms of perception and understanding and from its portrayal of alternatives, Brink is certainly reading Jacques Rancière’s thought (such as his notions of “dissensus” and “the distribution of the sensible”) into Badiou’s. Brink knows this and somewhat admits it in the book (57, 59). However, this in no way undermines the presence of Badiou in *Poetics and Justice*, as testified by its reference to Badiou’s concept of “appearance.” As Ed Pluth explains, Badiou’s elaboration of the term in *Logics of Worlds: Being and Event, 2* is meant to “resolve the problem of interaction between being and event” found in *Being and Event*; “to

make an event less absolutely other to its situation,” it is essential to expound how post-evental truths appear in the situation or world (Pluth 68-69). In *Logics*, Badiou holds that “[t]he function of appearing identifies . . . [the] elements” of a post-evental body, with “the inexistent” or what has hitherto remained unseen “suddenly raised to the maximal degree of existence” (*Logics* 466) and becoming perceptible truths. The import of “appearance” is reasserted by Badiou in *Second Manifesto for Philosophy*: as he maintains, “we must be able to explain how truths come to exist as bodies within a given world”; “[w]e must,” that is, “be capable of thinking how truths appear” (*Second Manifesto* 26). One of Badiou’s several examples of the emergence of truths or bodies as “what is beckoned and mobilized by the post-evental sublimation of the inexistent” is poetry (*Logics* 470). This explains why in *Poetics and Justice* Brink observes that a poetic configuration designates “a particular type of appearance” in relation to an event and hence bears the capacity for changing the world it presents (13). What appears post-eventally is what reflects and enables the “reconfiguring” of the articulated situation and the “incorporating” of what is “excluded from considerations by others” (1). That is to say, appearance makes possible “change *in* and *of* a field” (17).

Meanwhile, Badiou’s conception of a poem as a body that collects the elements (known as “points” in *Logics*) corresponding to an event further clarifies Brink’s insistence on intertextuality. Drawing on Julia Kristeva’s and Marc Angenot’s works on the term, Brink posits that the elements put together in and by a poem as a post-evental configuration are expressed by nothing but discourses; in fact, he takes “intertextual” and “interdiscursive” as synonymous (3, 9), making a poetic intertext always interdiscursively formulated and a discourse always intertextually fabricated. It is this intertextuality or interdiscursivity of a poem that makes possible its articulation of the world. As Brink puts it, “language is situated in relation to the world poetry invokes” (4). What should be inferred from this statement is that a poetic work marks a locus where language and the world coincide, with the poem constituting an intertextual expression of social concerns. Yet, this is not to say that Brink’s stance toward poetry is a poststructuralist or postmodern one. As Brink accents, what he means by *intertextuality* has nothing to do with the “diffusion of significance” or “free play of meaning” as put forth by philosophers like Jacques Derrida; instead, conceived in light of Badiou’s formulations, the term should be understood as carrying “a function of political affiliation” (3), to the degree that a poetic intertext alludes to and contests the aesthetic and social norms.

Again, Brink does not adopt the Badiouian framework without according it a new life. As he puts it, “Poetry that simply repeats has been said before disappoints readers, while poetry is borne of completely new poetic modes with no

connections with existing poetic possibilities (what Badiou calls the situation) may remain opaque and inaccessible as poetry” (9). Here Brink is implicitly addressing the “problem of interaction between being and event” pointed out by Pluth: poems may run the risk of either repeating what is or uttering what no one comprehends, with their political potency equally deflated. For this reason, intertextuality is essential to poetry making. As Brink maintains, “the association of reworked intertexts with newness *in relation to existing literature*” produces “the new” (“the inconsistency amid the consistency” [9]) and the visible (the consistency amid the inconsistency). If poetic works, with their “function of appearing,” are able to bridge the gap between being and event, this is possible only intertextually, with a poetic configuration constituting an intertext borrowing its phrasings from other discourses and thereby offering an alternative perspective. In Brink’s interpretation of Badiou, this is how the appearance of the new is likely and why it pertains to poetry.

Brink also revises the Badiouian evental philosophy with his coinages, specifically the above-mentioned “micro-event,” “after-event,” and “interevent.” As Brink argues, “one needs not to wait for the event” or assume a poetic work as “responding to *one event*” only (26, 27). Once attuned intertextually, Badiou’s writings can be said to speak of a plurality of “creative resuscitation of *events*” that “incite change” immediately (26). In *Poetics and Justice*, the numerous events that alter a given situation are rendered possible by poetic intertexts—also known as “micro-event,” “after-event,” and “interevent.” With these expressions, Brink contends that each poem decides what words and thoughts to be included in itself and subtracted from the predominant utterances; every name, verse, or passage of the text is then equivalent to a micro-event that remains unrecognized within the aesthetic or sociopolitical status quo but heralds change to come. This poetic work also marks an after-event since it may respond to a previous micro-event. And a poetic micro-event or after-event is at the same time an interevent in that it is always situated in the nexus of micro- and after-events it weaves alongside other nexuses. For Brink, this evental multiplication in place of the accent on “singular events only” makes possible the successive and “successful recognition of events” (24, 103).

Lastly, it should be noted that every few pages in the book Brink brings up the question of ethics, by which he points to the capacity and responsibility of a poetic configuration for addressing the social and discursive world it examines. This way, Brink adds a Levinasian touch to his poetics of event and change. Nevertheless, it is worth measuring the ethical force of the poems he studies with the ethics developed by Badiou. In his *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, Badiou states that “not every ‘novelty’ is an event” (*Ethics* 72), identifying three forms of evils

or pseudo-truths (71) and suggesting that an event may turn out to be a false one. The principle of eventual truthfulness can be applied to some poems Brink studies in *Poetics and Justice*. For example, whereas works by Tawara or Cage initiate stylistic changes and invoke social relations, they in fact, as Brink observes, reinforce the dominant discourses and values such as the consumerist or bourgeois ones (142, 184). This means that Brink is aware of the necessity of telling the true events from the false ones. This accounts for why in the very first paragraph of *Poetics and Justice* he writes that a poem may be seen “as reifying the status quo . . . or reconfiguring it” (1) and repeats this thesis later in the book (225). This either-or thesis is an important reminder: for a poetic intertext to be truly one about and of event and change, it has to pass the litmus test for political efficacy, primarily through the critical gaze of a reader as insightful as Brink.

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