

How the Poem Thinks: Musical Silence and Emptitude in Christian Bobin

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ABSTRACT

Ever since Plato's condemnation of the poets who did not deserve a place in his ideal city poetry has, in areas of the Western world, drawn suspicion as for its ability to convey the "truth." Philosophy, then, was thought to be a better candidate assuming that the truth in question could only be "discursive" as opposed to "poetic." In the West, the tension between poetry and philosophy reached a quasi-chiasmatic peak with modernism, a period during which the poem asserted in the most radical way its own mode of thinking. Alain Badiou in his *Que pense le poème?* (2016) qualifies the singularity of poetic thought in terms of "musical silence." Yet, in spite of the depth and beauty of the image, the poem falls short of being considered as philosophical thought proper. By moving away from a (Western) conception of philosophy centred on *logos* as method, the poem may conceivably reveal a profoundly philosophical nature. Such is the case with the poetic prose of French contemporary writer Christian Bobin. Starting from Badiou's conception of "musical silence" in poetry this essay reflects on the extent to which *emptitude* at work in Bobin amounts to a uniquely philosophical mode of thinking.

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*La poésie est une pensée échappée de l'enclos
des raisonnements, une cavale de lumière qui saute
par dessus la barrière du cerveau et file droit vers son
maître invisible.*

*J'ai surpris les yeux de Dieu dans le bleu cassant
d'une petite plume de geai.¹*

¹ Christian Bobin, *Les ruines du ciel* (Paris: Gallimard, 2009), 103. "Poetry is thought that escaped the enclosure of reasoning, a spree of light that jumps over the barrier of the brain and speeds on its way towards its invisible master. I caught God's eyes in the crisp blue of a jay's little feather." (Unless indicated otherwise, translations are mine).

The work of Christian Bobin (1951-) still needs to be fully discovered in the English speaking world. He is certainly a writer whose style cannot be easily pinned down, and perhaps "poetic prose" would best qualify his writing. Still, in all likelihood, Bobin's work will soon be seen on equal footing with the greatest poets of the modern world such as, in the West, Yeats, Rilke, Pessoa, Mandelstam, Rimbault, Lorca or Neruda. Why this? Because, just like his predecessors, he is an epoch-making poet, not by passively mirroring the spirit of the time by a clever usage of whatever aesthetic artifices; but rather by unsettling with words and thus awakening us to the ethos of his time. Kandinsky famously wrote

Every work of art is a child of
its time, while often it is the parent
of our emotions.

Thus, every cultural period
creates art of its own, which can
never be repeated again.¹

Bobin is a child of his time who has grown out of it to awaken us in the most singular fashion to what we have lost and what could be retrieved in our present world. As a poet he thus contributes in the most spectacular fashion to the building of culture --- a brilliance that falls within the category of what Immanuel Kant called the work of "genius".² Indeed, Bobin disincarnates the attitudes and aspirations of what has become nowadays world, that techno-world steeped in mediatised experiences, delusion of complexity, and, above all, ethical alienation. What Bobin's poetic prose incarnates is a return to the concrete, the richness of simplicity, and the relational enaction of the person within the world.³

Of course, Bobin's poetic prose is written first-hand in French, which inexorably brings about the question of the loss (and gain) when read, or explained, in a different language. We are used to hearing that the more "poetical" a text

is, the less likely it will travel without loss into a different cultural context. On the contrary, the more "scientific" a formulation is the more universal it becomes. Albert Einstein's equation $E=mc^2$ can be understood around the globe once the mathematical symbols are learned, whereas Welsh poet R.S. Thomas' *Pietà* (1966) is unlikely to speak evenly to readers depending on their life experience of, say, the English language, Christianity and familiarity with artistic representations of the Virgin Mary holding the dead body of the Christ. In other words, much (not all) of the meaningfulness of a poem depends on the cultural texture within which it is written and read.

Always the same hills
Crowd the horizon,
Remote witnesses
Of the still scene.

¹ Wassily Kandinsky, *On the Spiritual in Art* (New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1946), 9.

² In the sense that, for Kant, although genius "is a talent for producing something for which no determinate rule can be given" and that "the foremost property of genius must be originality", "[s]ince nonsense too can be original, the products of genius must also be models, i.e., they must be exemplary; hence, though they do not themselves arise through imitation, still they must serve others for this, i.e., as a standard or rule by which to judge." Immanuel Kant, "Fine Art Is the Art of Genius," in *The Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett, 1987 [1790]), 55 46, 174-175.

³ For a formalistic study on Bobin's major themes see Claire Carlut, *Entre Poésie et Philosophie: l'oeuvre de Christian Bobin* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2015).

And in the foreground
The tall Cross,
Sombre, untenanted,
Aches for the Body
That is back in the cradle
Of a maid's arms.⁴

R.S. Thomas, *Pietà*

The greatness of a poem, then, does not necessarily depend on its ability to travel unshaken across cultures and languages. Yet, in his collection of essays mainly focused on Western modern poetry and published as *Que pense le poème?* (lit. What does the poem think?), philosopher Alain Badiou suggests the opposite: "*le poème, le grand poème, se laisse traduire.*"⁵ Badiou cannot but admit the unavoidable losses in translation, whether formal or linguistic, whether pertaining to the musicality of the poem or the usage of metaphors, metonymies, symbols and other culturally ingrained practices of linguistic imageries. Still, in the "great poem," Badiou claims, something remains untouched: the "singularity of the [poet's] musical silence."⁶ Despite the obvious essentialism and universalism as well as culture-centrism of what constitutes the "great poem," the claim invites us to reflect, albeit with noticeable nuances, on a fundamental aspect of Christian Bobin's poetic prose that we shall call its "emptitude" as correlative of "plenitude."

1. Alain Badiou's "musical silence": How certain poems think

To understand what Badiou means by the musical silence of the poet and its singularity, we have to look at *how*

the poem thinks rather than what it thinks, for poetry, in actual fact, shares with "discursive thinking" ("*pensée discursive*"; "*dianoia*" in ancient Greek)⁷ many similar subject-matters in size and kind. Beside the established modes of conceiving poetry, either based on formal criteria (e.g. lyrical, rhythmic, or versal), or on ontological ones such as the ability the poem has to unveil being, reveal truth, or disclose "presencing" (as well-knowingly expounded by Martin Heidegger), Badiou suggests that the way the poem *thinks* depends on its ability to "affirm" without "object."⁸ This is where lies the real "voice of the poet", in other words "the singularity of [the poet's] musical silence."

Leaving aside once and for all the overly universalising suggestion that the great poem is the one whose "singularity of [the poet's] musical silence"⁹ remains untouched across cultures regardless of the linguistic and formal transformations, we can see how for Badiou the poem --- certain poems --- think: the singularity of the "musical silence" is what brings forth an "affirmation."¹⁰ At first glance, the claim sounds self-evident. What resonates to most ears as a form of plenitude needs to spring out of emptiness, and vice versa. In other words, full and empty are mutually self-determining and self-determined. The silence of the poem is an aesthetic configuration that brings forth the plenitude of presence. This is *how* the poem "thinks," which Badiou as may be expected distinguishes from "knowing".¹¹ The poem "thinks" but does not "know," for it does not seek to establish knowledge of some-thing as object. Furthermore, the poem *silences*

the object to the point that it no longer thinks *in relation* to the object. And to achieve the silencing of the object Badiou asserts that the poem proceeds to either "subtraction" (*soustraction*) or "dissemination" (*dissémination*).¹¹

"Subtraction" is the means by which the poem manages to withdraw the object of representation from the line of sight of the poetical figure that becomes in the process akin to the abstraction of mathematical numbers. The poetry of Stéphane Mallarmé thus epitomises that form of object-less "pure thinking" with its usage of images such as "constellations", "stars", or "tempest", in other words metonymies, for their ungraspable designated objecthood withdraws to let the word speak for itself. "Dissemination" equally dissolves objectification but proceeds differently: the recognisable object to which the word points is silenced through the process of metaphors. Although the object is recognisable through the metaphor the latter points to another direction, disseminating thus the objecthood of what is represented. In this instance Badiou talks about an "excess" in contrast with the "lack" that characterises the subtraction of objecthood. Rimbaud's poetry would typify "dissemination".¹²

There are also other emptying devices that can equally fall under Badiou's categories of subtraction and dissemination. Versal and rhythmic "inconsistency" found for example in Celan's poetry that runs against the formal order of lyricism. "Disruption" and "disappearance" equally operate as "dis-objectifying" devices that let the figure bring forth a "subject without

4 R.S. Thomas, *Pietà* (London: Rupert Hart Davis, 1966).

5 Alain Badiou, *Que pense le poème?* (Caen: Nous, 2016), 17. This short collection of reflections on poetry, albeit somehow unsystematic and at times veiled by unnecessary rhetorical effects and stylistic artifices, offers nonetheless original insights into the idea of poetical "silence" from the perspective of the theoretician of the "*mathème*".

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid., 25.

8 Ibid., 20.

9 Ibid., 17.

10 Ibid., 20.

11 Ibid., 18-20.

12 Ibid., 20-21

object";¹³ or "disorientation" as in Trakl whereby figures are *unplaced* whether in terms of omitted identity or location.¹⁴ Such poetry, in other words, makes present the il y a by stripping the word from what it designates and its "empirical objectivity".¹⁵

The effect of the poem using emptying devices is to bring forth the "affirmation" of some-thing while preventing representational thinking and its model, i.e., objecthood. Poetry --- the one whose "musical silence" can travel across cultures --- induces therefore "an experience without object",¹⁶ that is to say, "pure affirmation." Poetry thus defined amounts to a "complete dis-objectification of presence" ("*complète désobjectification de la présence*").¹⁷ Poetry ends up thinking the "presence of the present"¹⁸ by emptying meaning from its established signifying function and by inexorably distorting linguistic norms. Hence the mysterious character of the poem for musical silence remains a non-totalising truth that can neither be known nor named ("*innommable*").¹⁹ Here, one cannot help thinking of Badiou's conception of the musical silence of the poem as a form of ontological Taoism. The first lines of the Tao Te Ching read as follows:

The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao.

The name that can be named is not the eternal name.

The nameless is the beginning of Heaven and Earth.

The named is the mother of the ten thousand things.²⁰

Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*

The poem would then manifest the way words name for eternity that which cannot be named, that is, in Badiou's words, the "disappearing of that which makes itself present."²¹ But the comparison falls short: the way in Badiou becomes a "power";²² the power of words that the same words cannot name and therefore know --- but still a power, as if it was able to force its way through regardless of the ethical need to harmonise with *the ten thousand things*.

Poetry cannot "name" and as such is no philosophy understood in the traditional Western sense: poetry does not seek to know thinking, rather it expresses the singularity of thought.²³ This is why Badiou asserts that the poem is a "thinking" ("*pensée*") rather than a "knowing" ("*connaissance*"), for poetry proceeds to a "withdrawal" ("*retrait*") from what makes knowledge possible. This is also the reason why poetry, to a greater or a lesser degree depending on the epoch, has always unsettled philosophy of which it can only remain a "symptom." And the period during which (Western) poetry adopted the most unsettling posture as regard (Western) philosophy, Badiou calls it "*L'âge des poètes*,"²⁴ which very broadly runs from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, from Rimbaud and Mallarmé to Trakl and Celan via Caiero and Mandelstam

--- with Hölderlin as a nineteenth century precursor. This is the period when Western poetry reached a nodal point in the way it relates to philosophy. The period is singular when compared with how the relationship was conceived in ancient Greece.

Badiou identifies three conceptions that proved to be foundational in Western history of philosophy: 1) Parmenidean, a fusion between the subjective authority of the poem and the validity of its philosophical exposition; 2) Platonic, whereby poetry and philosophy are clearly distinguished in the form of "argumentative distance"; 3) Aristotelian, when poetic thinking is included in philosophy and becomes a category of objects on which philosophy reflects --- a "regional" form of thinking that marks the birth of "aesthetics," a "*régionalité esthétique*."²⁵ Beside the question of the validity of his categorisation, what Badiou identifies as a nodal relationship between poetry and philosophy in his *âge des poètes* not only differs from the Platonic and Aristotelian conceptions but also, perhaps more surprisingly, for the Parmenidean conception. Even more surprisingly given his notion of affirmative "musical silence" in forms of poetry, Badiou departs from Heidegger's ontological understanding of the "great" poem, for it smacks of a "re-activation of the sacred" combined with the illusionary endeavour to retrieve some allegedly forgotten conception of authentic disclosure of Being traced back to the Pre-Socratics (Anaxi-

13 Ibid., 44.

14 Ibid., 48.

15 Ibid., 70.

16 Ibid., 22.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid., 58.

19 Ibid., 73.

20 Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, trans. Feng Gia-Fu and Jane English (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), One.

21 Badiou, *Que pense le poème?*, 74.

22 Ibid.: "*Tout poème fait venir dans la langue un pouvoir, le pouvoir de fixer éternellement la disparition de ce qui se présente.*"

23 Ibid., 77.

24 Ibid., 29-49.

25 Ibid., 53-54.

mander, Parmenides and Heraclites).²⁶ Sure, Heidegger sought to work out poetry as autonomous form of thinking, and as such neither Platonic nor Aristotelian, neither "distancing" nor "aesthetic." Great poetry for Heidegger had its own authentic truth-function, just like "great art"; in fact, Badiou claims, Heidegger did no more than reinterpret in his own high-minded language the Presocratic conception of poetry as fusion with philosophy whereby authentic truth lies within the "flesh of language" ("*la chair de la langue*"), the *saying* of the word.²⁷ Heidegger thus failed to offer an alternative fourth way to how poetry and philosophy can relate to each other.

As we know, the discord between poetry and philosophy has, in the Western world, ancient origins with long tasting effects including on Badiou's own conception of poetry as "musical silence." Plato condemned painting and poetry in Book 10 of *The Republic* because both were thought to be a danger for the good order of the *Polis*.²⁸ The problem was the proclaimed "mimetic" nature of poetry, to the point that it had to be excluded from the *Polis*. *Mimesis* in art can only provide a pale copy of the original truth. In fact, the crux of the problem was that poetry, unlike philosophy, is no discursive thinking. As a result, poetry for Plato can only be dubious, on the same level as Sophism.²⁹ As a "non-thought" with no explicit thought-process, poetry can only remain obscure and opaque.

As Badiou observes, poetry does not seek to work out reality and the Platonic Idea in terms of "measuring, numbering, and weighting" ("*la mesure, le nombre, le poids*").³⁰ In this sense poetic thinking is fundamentally

different from the "paradigm of mathematics" and by extension indeed discursive thinking. How can poetry affirm something while remaining obscure and opaque? The question is at the heart of the ancient discord between philosophy and poetry. In the Western tradition poetry has always, to varying degrees depending on the epochs, unsettled philosophy, assuming that the latter had to be methodologically identified as "discursive." How could "thinking without knowledge," to use Badiou's expression, be possible?³¹ How could poetic thought practice be grasped if "unmeasurable" ("*incalculable*")? Unlike discursive thinking, poetry does not go "through" (*dia-noia*) as a process that travels from the figure to the object and the object to the figure. Poetry is wholly "affirmative"; it does not seek to expound the Idea in all its clarity from the experience of objects. In fact, much of modern poetry shows that opacity does not mean absence of thought. Metaphors in modern poetry are anything but "blind."³²

Badiou's "musical silence" in poetry has to be understood as a paradigm of "dis-objectifying operations" that express forms of ineffable truth --- an achievement much "envied" by philosophy throughout Western history of ideas. The operations can take the shape of "subtractions" or "disseminations" or both, of which *dianoia* is incapable by nature and definition. Poetry enacts thinking and, unlike philosophy, does not seek to *reflect on* thinking. The envy of philosophy then becomes clearer: Isn't it the case that poetry as enacted or sensible thinking is more "real" than philosophy as thinking on thinking? The ancient rivalry that Plato alluded to was that of enacted thinking

versus discursive thinking. And for Badiou the fundamental distinction between philosophy (and science) and poetry is precisely based on this distinction and tension.³³ For Françoise Dastur, the ancient rivalry "between *mythos* and *logos*" is no less than a fundamental question at the heart of the whole development of Western philosophy from its very origin.³⁴

Anyone versed in Western philosophy would be hard-pressed to disagree with this view on the two distinctive thinking practices and how they have evolved in the Western world, but only on one condition: that we accept that philosophy, regardless of etymological considerations, be defined by a method that seeks order instead of chaos, clarity instead of opacity --- a mode of reasoning, indeed the *logos*, that has broadly determined the nature of Western philosophy since Classical Greece. But there remains a critical problem. This conception excludes de facto entire portions of the corpus of thought from pre-modern East Asia, pre-colonial India and Africa, as well as, to a lesser extent, the Pre-Socratics. Following this stance, the Tao Te Ching of Lao Tzu, the *Lun Yu* of Kong Fu Tzu, or the *Shobogenzo* of Dogen do not belong to the sphere of "philosophy," for they are like poetry and to a greater or lesser degree "affirmative" and indeed do not seek to expound the Idea in all its clarity from the experience of things. From the perspective of method, these texts express "thinking" but are not "philosophical." But if, instead of focusing on the method to determine what is philosophical as opposed to poetical, we ask ourselves what distinguishes philosophy from other thinking practices we will be at pain not to consider

26 Ibid., 57.

27 Ibid., 56.

28 Plato, *The Republic* (London: Penguin Classics, 2007), bk x, 335-353.

29 Ibid., 25.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid., 26-27.

34 Françoise Dastur, *à la naissance des choses - art, poésie et philosophie* (Fougère: encre marine, 2005), 111-132.

the aforementioned texts as authentically philosophical. Philosophy as practice that reveals thinking in motion, underneath the surface of established orders of appearances can, as such, be identified in certain forms of poetry or poetic prose --- to which that of Christian Bobin belongs. The musical silence that Badiou discusses also characterises, to some extent, Bobin's writing. The silence, however, should not be understood as if in the service of the affirmation of some plenitude, but rather as the very motion of "emptitude."

2. "Emptitude" as motion in Christian Bobin

If there is a poet whose work can be characterised as philosophically unsettling --- and therefore profoundly philosophical --- it is Christian Bobin. He belongs to a category of poets that proves the traditional Western tradition of distinguishing poetry from philosophy as distinctive thinking practice (i.e., not as method) to be flawed from its very origin. Bobin's poetic prose is made of configurations of emptying words, the very "dis-objectifying operations" that Badiou identifies as one of the characteristics of the essence of poetry, especially that of his "*âge des poètes*." Bobin is of course not the first poet to unfold the link between "thinking" and "emptiness."

- *Depuis quand écrivez-vous?*

- *Depuis que je n'ai plus le souci d'écrire.*³⁵

Christian Bobin, *L'Éloignement du monde*

As Badiou notes, so did poets Caeiro and Campos.³⁶ But before them, should it be stressed, several schools of Buddhism throughout centuries and

across traditions from India to Japan via China and Thailand developed aesthetic practices, including poetry, around the fundamentals of *sūnyatā* (emptiness) and *vijñāna* (mind).³⁷

To set emptiness in motion Bobin uses simplicity, as Chan and Zen Buddhist poets and artists do --- a form of ostensible minimalism akin to *wabi sabi* aesthetics that suspends the plenitude of things by withdrawing the explicit, the superfluous and the ornamental. Such an austerity is no representation of the austere but austerity in motion, in other words emptiness at work. Bobin's poetics does not induce any desire for fullness or for what is felt to be lacking. His poems do not represent forms of emptiness but are rather emptying modes whose movement awakens the reader to the formation of things as perceived, in other words their *such-ness*. His poetic configurations are therefore neither figurative nor narrative; neither romantic nor picturesque. The poetics in Bobin does not follow the clearly marked path of lyricism or any aestheticism that would prevent the emptying motion of words from letting things as such be perceived. What is figured in his poetic prose surprises us precisely by averting us from fixing in time and space the link between the signs, the metaphors, or the metonymies, and what they designate or narrate even if by transposition. We do not recognise what the figures represent or tell us; we experience their figurality. Bobin's wordings are the event, they catch us by surprise, but in a gentle manner, minimally, in a way that invites us to attentive contemplation.

*Rien de plus bouleversant que la vision de petites pantoufles d'enfant dans une chambre, un jour d'école : toute absence même légère parle de la mort.*³⁸

Christian Bobin,
Carnet du soleil

Yet, emptitude in Bobin should not be confused with a mere form of "minimalism" in the sense of using a minimal amount of words in order to express the essential. This would inexorably lead to establishing an aesthetics of the plenitude of things calling thus for the mind to recognise on one single level of meaning what is "there" in order to experience its "presence." Bobin's poetic prose does make usage of metaphors, metonymies, periphrases, or attributes, but precisely with the aim of creating empty spaces and withdrawals to enliven the figure as in, for example, Zen painting, Noh theatre, Japanese cinematic cuts (*kire*), or asymmetric flower arrangement (*ikebana*). And just as Haiku poetry should not be categorised as minimalist per se as it operates on different levels of emptitude, neither should Bobin's poetic prose for its usage of what we may call "cut-figuring" and austerity.

*Sur la route d'Arnay-le-Duc, le cerisier lançait ses bras en feu vers le carré noir d'une fenêtre ouverte --- comme une déclaration d'amour sauvage.*³⁹

Christian Bobin, *Une bibliothèque de nuages*

Even his anaphora that may be perceived as minimalising difference and variation are no less than emptying devices. Repeating or echoing the same word in two or more slightly different ways or contexts strip the word from its designating dimension to give it not

³⁵ Christian Bobin, *L'Éloignement du monde* (Éditions Lettres Vives: Castellare-di-Casinca, 1993), 53. "Since when have you been writing? Since I am no longer concerned about writing."

³⁶ Badiou, *Que pense le poème*, 36.

³⁷ Examples of aesthetics of emptiness in Buddhism include among many others the form-spirit aesthetics of Bodhidharma; Chinese Chan's ink and wash painting of the Five Dynasties (907–960) or the Southern Song (1127–1279) period; Yoshida Kenko's *Essays in Idleness* (1332); Tanizaki Jun'ichiro's *In Praise of Shadows* (1933).

³⁸ Christian Bobin, *Carnet du soleil* (Éditions Lettres Vives: Castellare-di-Casinca, 2011), 52. "Nothing is more poignant than the sight of a little child's slippers in a bedroom on a school day: any absence, however light, speaks of death."

³⁹ Christian Bobin, *Une bibliothèque de nuages* (Éditions Lettres Vives: Castellare-di-Casinca, 2006), 24. On the road to Arnay-le-Duc, the cherry tree threw its burning arms towards the black square of an open window --- like a wild declaration of love."

so much a permanence, an aura, or a presence, but rather a such-ness of its own within the textual configuration. The technique of anaphora was used among others by Celan, although more in the vein of the aesthetic tradition of "presencing" rather than "such-ness." In the following passage from Bobin's *Souveraineté du vide* the image of "leaving" and "coming back" is repeated several times, first by describing lights in the sky similar to some Virginia creeper on a wall torn out by the wind and growing back, and then to evoke the experience of love and absence. The principle of cut-figuring consists in different levels of imaging interrupting or "disseminating" each other, to use Badiou's expression, while echoing each other so that what is described and reflected upon becomes perceived *as such*.⁴⁰

*Un ciel comme
un jardin, avec des lumières folles, sau-
vages. Elles croissent, couvrant tout
l'espace, comme une vigne vierge sur
un vieux mur. Le vent les arrache, elles
reviennent. Un ciel sans jardinier.*

*Vous partez, vous
revenez. Dans votre absence, j'avale
une quantité considérable de paysag-
es, d'émotions et de lumières....*

*Vous revenez, vous
partez. Dans votre absence, une main
passe devant mes yeux, comme pour
les clore....⁴¹*

(Christian
Bobin, *Souveraineté du vide*)

The poetics in Bobin is no abstraction deprived of signifying dimension. Of course not. The figures mean *as such*, not from themselves, but in themselves by virtue of disrupting representation (figuration) and narration (signification) and therefore emptying

the designating link between the word and the reality or story it is expected to point to or tell. The emptying means that Bobin predominantly uses are austerity and cut-figuring. The former is a straightforward economy of words and elimination of the superfluous while the latter, again, cuts off among groups of words, sentences, or paragraphs one level of representation and narration from the following while at the same time maintaining some link in one form or another. Bobin's poetic prose very often brings to life otherwise unremarkable descriptive accounts with interruptions by seemingly unrelated imageries that nonetheless echo the former at reflective levels. The cut-figuring can occur with the same group of words, or between two sentences or two paragraphs. In the following lines the cutting-off passage takes place at the end of the description of a dove standing still on a branch of a lime tree and who suddenly flies away. We then discover an implausible explanation in the form of comparison: as if taken by a thought so beautiful that the dove had to tell it to her friend:

*Une tourterelle,
longtemps immobile et songeuse
sur une branche dutilleul, s'envole
brusquement, comme saisie par une
pensée si belle qu'il lui faut tout de
suite aller la dire à son ami.⁴²*

(Bobin, *Ressusciter*)

The techniques of emptying used do not make Bobin a modernist poet of the type of Eliot or Char. Bobin's phrasing does not betray any violence of the means assertively becoming aware of itself. Bobin's poetic prose is no formalistic experimentations either; this is no meta-poetry. Means and meaning become one and the same thing, a figurality whose voice saturates and even stuns any mediation towards

the designated thing, be it real, ideal, desired or virtual. Hence the apparent opacity of the poetic wording, its apparent lack of "clarity" or communicative transparency, in other words when the signifiers operate as a vehicle for clearly distinguishable signified configuration that equally clearly points in the direction of a designated object or unfolds a comprehensible story. This lack, incidentally, defines much of the corpus of modern poetry to various degrees and in various ways with modernism as its most radical form. Still, the opacity of the poetic writing, the way words are configured, still means something. Badiou tells us that poetry in essence amounts to a mere "saying" (*un dire*), or even a "declaration" that generates its own authority.⁴³ Bobin's poetic prose certainly "says" without resorting to discursive transparency, explanation, or validation; his poems "declare" without having to be confirmed; in this sense they do not rely on any authoritative models to validate a truth precisely because the same truth takes place by virtue of the poetics, *as such*. It would therefore be ill-thought to suggest that the authority of the truth-model is replaced by the authority of the truth-poem --- a form of irresponsible freedom enacted through some affirmative subjectivity. There is, in Bobin, no authority at work, be it on the side of the object or the subject. In fact, his poetics not only "dis-objectifies" but also "dis-subjectifies." The figures mean something, but as such. This is no authoritative freedom but, instead, an ethical freedom that brings together poet, reader and world through the experience of emptitude whereby time-passing with the poetic prose is the very emptying motion that lets things be perceived *as such*. There is therefore no autonomy, or rather autonomous autonomy of the poetics in spite of the

40 See Ohashi Ryosuke, "Kire and Iki," trans. Graham Parkes, in ed. Michael Kelly, *The Encyclopedia of Aesthetics* (New York: Oxford University Press), 2: 553-55.

41 Christian Bobin, *Souveraineté du vide* (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), 72-73. "A sky like a garden, with crazy, wild lights. They grow, coating the whole space, like a Virginia creeper on an old wall. The wind tears them out, but they come back. A sky without a gardener. You leave, and you come back. In your absence, I absorb a sizeable amount of landscapes, emotions and lights. ... You come back, and you go. In your absence, a hand passes in front of my eyes, as if to close them."

42 Christian Bobin, *Ressusciter* (Paris : Gallimard, 2001), 80. "A turtle dove, for a long time motionless and heedful on a branch of the lime tree, suddenly flies away as if seized by a thought so beautiful that it had to be told straight away to her friend."

43 "... Il est seulement un dire, une déclaration qui ne tire son autorité que d'elle-même." Badiou, *Que pense le poème?*, 13.

naturalness of its motion (understood in Aristotelian terms). For the poetics to express the emptitude of words, their musical silence, and the *such-ness* of things, its voice must remain ethical. Bobin's poetic prose is without doubt one of the most telling examples.

*La libellule, en me voyant, se fige sur la barrière. Je m'arrête pour la regarder. Le charriot de l'éternel avec ses roues de bois passe entre nous sans un bruit, puis la libellule revient à ses affaires et je poursuis ma promenade avec dans l'âme une nouvelle nuance de bleu.*⁴⁴

Christian Bobin, *Un assassin blanc comme neige*

True, the poem always reveals, to some degree, a poetics of the in-itself of language. As Martiniquan philosopher and poet Edouard Glissant puts it,

A poetics of language in-itself. It sanctions the moment when language, as if satisfied with its perfection, ceases to take for its object the recounting of its connection with particular surroundings, to concentrate solely upon its fervor to exceed its limits and reveal thoroughly the elements composing it --- solely upon its engineering skill with these.⁴⁵

The poetics of the in-itself of Bobin's language is, however, no disregard for the "surrounding" designated or narrated world; such stance would

amount to abstraction or, indeed, formalistic experimentation. Rather, the such-ness of the word in Bobin is its emptying motion *in regard* to its designated or narrated sources. Far from being a mere poetics of the in-itself of language per se, Bobin's poems incarnate a figural poetics that is anything but folded onto itself. The figurality is achieved by resorting to representational and narrative cut-figuring as well as by emptying itself from anything superfluous, explicit, or accomplished through austerity and simplicity. Bobin's emptying word is the voice of the voiceless that Japanese philosopher Nishida Kitaro claimed characterised "Oriental culture."⁴⁶ There also lies the beauty of Bobin's poetic prose; not in its formalistic autonomy nor in the explicit plenitude of what the mind seeks to recognise, but in the suggested emptitude of the such-ness of the word.

Cut-figuring and austerity are similarly well-known emptying tools of the *wabi sabi* aesthetics of "im-perfection." These include poverty, understatement, mystery, asymmetry, and ephemerality, all of which Bobin makes use with words for a figurality whose effect on the reader is a form of awakening, more than, as it has often been suggested, wonder.⁴⁷ Awakening through Bobin's poetic prose amounts thus to Dogen's "enlightenment" more than anything else. Bobin's words are configured in a way that calls for attentiveness; that invites to resist distraction and remain faithful to the voice of the poet; liberates from ties, constraints

and concerns whether material or personal; and that lets the poem be read in poverty, as it were. This is Dogen's thought from his *Shobogenzo* as it transpires from Bobin's poetics.⁴⁸ One is awakened to the such-ness of things by contemplating the emptitude of words. The aesthetic experience in Bobin pertains to such an awakening. As Japanese Tendai Buddhist poet Shinkei (1406-1475) reportedly put it, "In linked verse, put your mind to what is not said,"⁴⁹ so that one can appreciate the "beauty of empty space" (*yohaku no bi*).⁵⁰ In Bobin's poetic prose, cut-figuring and austerity put our mind to the emptying motion of the such-ness of things. This is an aesthetics of its own.

*L'absolu a éclaté sur le carrelage dans un bruit de vaisselle précieuse. De toute façon on ne s'en servait jamais.*⁵¹

Christian Bobin, *Un assassin blanc comme neige*

To express the emptitude of things through the word awakens the reader to their such-ness and, by doing so, reduces the distance between noesis and noema to its minimum. Does this make Bobin's writing akin to phenomenological descriptions? What Bobin puts aesthetically in motion through words are the emptying relations that make the taking place of the such-ness of things possible. Bobin describes the emptitude of things at work rather than their posited plenitude. Still, the reader

44 Christian Bobin, *Un assassin blanc comme neige* (Paris : Gallimard, 2011), 22. "The dragonfly, when it sees me, freezes on the fence. I stop to look at her. The chariot of the eternal with its wooden wheels passes between us without a noise. Then, the dragonfly goes back to its occupation, and I resume my walk with in my soul a new shade of blue."

45 Edouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997). 25. "Une poétique du langage -en-soi. Elle sanctionne le moment où la langue, comme satisfaite de sa perfection, cesse de se donner comme objet le récit de son rapport à un entour, pour se coincer sur sa seule ardeur à outrer ses limites, à manifester à fond les éléments qui la composent - sur sa seule science à les manigancer." in Édouard Glissant, *Poétique de la relation* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1990), 37.

46 See Nishida Kitaro, from James Heisig's translation, in "Nishida's Philosophical Equivalents of Enlightenment and No-Self," *Bulletin of the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture* 39 (2015): 46. "Obviously, there is a great deal to esteem in the dazzling development of Occidental culture which made form into being and formation into the good, and a great deal to be learned from it. But is there not something that lies concealed in the ground of the Oriental culture that has nourished our forebears for thousands of years, something like seeing the form of the formless or hearing the voice of the voiceless? Our hearts never cease in its pursuit; what I want to do is give it a philosophical basis."

47 See Jean-Michel Maulpoix, "Le désastre et la merveille," in *La Quinzaine Littéraire*, 15 Janvier 1987.

48 Dogen, *Shobogenzo - The Treasure House of the Eye of the True Teaching*, trans. Rev. Hubert Nearman (Mount Shasta: Shasta Abbey Press, 2007).

49 Quoted by Komparu Kunio, in *The Noh Theatre: Principles and Perspectives* trans. Jane Corddry and Stephen B. Comee (Warren, Conn.: Floating World Editions, 2005), 74.

50 See, for example, Günter Nitschke's *Japanese Gardens: Right Angle and Natural Form* (Cologne: Taschen, 1999), 108.

51 Bobin, *Un assassin blanc comme neige*, 67. "The absolute has burst on the tiled floor with a the sound of precious plates. It was never used anyway."

cannot but remain closely attuned to the simplicity of the poet's voice for his words awaken us to that extraordinary moment when the ordinary appears through its own emptitude. Typically, Bobin orchestrates the ordinary for it to surprise us, be noticed, and become an event, but precisely to induce attentive contemplation. There is thus a close intimacy between the reader and the poet; a moment of awakening that the word allows to be shared, here and now. Glissant tells us that poets as subjects withdraw to reveal themselves in the very poem they create: "The creators of a text [i.e., the poem] is effaced, or, rather, is done away with, to be revealed in the texture of his creation."⁵² But there is more to it. The poem only comes to life as a node of authorial and readerly emptying, as it were. What Glissant says about the fundamental of relation in poetry also --- and obviously --- applies to the reader. Through his reference to French traveller, polymath and literary figure Victor Segalen's aesthetic interpretation of the morally marked recognition of the other, Glissant defines the poet as one endowed with the ability to sense the surprise caused by otherness.⁵³ The *choc* at stake is no less than the emptitude found in Bobin's poetics, which appeals for the reader's well-disposability towards aesthetic self-emptying --- both a communion and the shock of mystery.⁵⁴

*Le rouge-gorge trouvé
mort devant la porte du garage retient
sous son duvet la chaleur des jours
heureux. Dieu est un assassin blanc
comme neige.*⁵⁵

Putting in motion emptying relations implies that the images used do not operate on the same levels of representation or narration; the images cannot be fixed systems of signs that would enable the reader to recognise what is represented or understand what is narrated. Again, this is not to suggest that Bobin's poetic prose is abstracted from any sense of reality or even ideality. In many instances we find, for example, criticisms of society, its absurdities, effective contempt for misery, greed, consumerism, the pernicious effect of television, and ignorance, among others, for instance in *L'inespérée*.⁵⁶ His images, however, are transient; they pass by and through leaving thus behind their expected or desired referents. This is how the images become alive, meaningfully *in excess*, having therefore more impact precisely by emptying themselves from models they are supposed to represent, narrate, or, as in the aforementioned cases, criticise. Most importantly we know the images will die off as soon as we decipher once and for all what they refer or point to. This is to say that Bobin's poetics is anything but symbolic. Bobin's poetics is dia-symbolic. It wanders through the symbols that can only be read as possibilities thus left to the imagination. The result is a suggestive imagery, very precise but never explicit, similar to the brushstroke of the Chan painter or the breath of the Shakuhachi player.

*Les mousses le long du
chemin forestier qui mène à la boîte
aux lettres sont si lumineuses qu'elles
me coupent sans arrêt la parole.*

L'aiguille de Dieu est

*enfoncée dans toutes sortes de tissus
dont je ne me lasse pas d'admirer la
richesse.*

*Agrippé au radeau de
la beauté.*⁵⁷

Christian Bobin, *Les ruines du ciel*

The extraordinary such-ness of things, when expressed, calls for a particular perceptual attitude: attentive contemplation. First, that of the poet, who then transmits the perception to the reader. The attentive contemplation at stake is not the pupil's, disciple's, or devotee's attitude who needs to learn how to accept a lesson of morality; nor is it that of the critic who evaluates the degree of formal originality; or that of the human being who realises what is the essence of poetry. The poetics at stake, the one that calls for attentive contemplation, is no didactic poetry found for example in Milton's *Paradise Lost*; no modernist experimental poetry; nor does it have the universalist pretension of a Hölderlin. Attentive contemplation as response to Bobin's poetic prose, from his *Lenchantement simple*, *Éloge du rien*, or *Souveraineté du vide* is the emptying mind shaped not by normative morality but ethical orienting; not by attunement to formalistic complexions but to the beauty of the such-ness of things, and not by the ability to grasp a universal truth in the poetical language, but by one's availability to be awakened to the infinite richness of the particular and the ordinary. And for Bobin, there is an urge to retrieve this ability to contemplate and be attentive to the rich simplicity of life as suggested

52 Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 25. "Le créateur de texte s'efface, ou plutôt s'abolit pour se révéler, dans la texture de ce qu'il a créé." [Poétique de la relation, 37].

53 "...Segalen does not merely describe recognition of the other as a moral obligation [...] but he considers it an aesthetic constituent, the first edict of a real poetics of Relation. The power to experience the shock of elsewhere is what distinguished the poet." Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 29-30. "Segalen ne dit pas seulement que la reconnaissance de l'autre est une obligation morale [...] il en fait une constituante esthétique, le premier édit d'une véritable poétique de la Relation. Le pouvoir de ressentir le choc de l'ailleurs est ce qui nomme le poète." [Poétique de la relation, 42].

54 Glissant suggests that any poetics of relation is a "créolisation" defined by gathering and wandering: "It is not merely an encounter; a shock (in Segalen's sense), a métissage, but a new and original dimension allowing each person to be there and elsewhere, rooted and open, lost in the mountains and free beneath the sea, in harmony and in errantry." Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 37. "Non seulement une rencontre, un choc (au sens ségalénien), un métissage, mais une dimension inédite qui permet à chacun d'être là et ailleurs, enracinée et ouvert, perdu dans la montagne et libre sous la mer, en accord et en errance." [Poétique de la relation, 46].

55 Bobin, *Un assassin blanc comme neige*, 41. "The robin found dead in front of the garage door is keeping under its down the warmth of happy days. God is a white as snow murderer."

56 Christian Bobin, "Le mal," in *L'inespérée* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), 17-26.

57 Bobin, *Les ruines du ciel*, 46. "The mosses running alongside the forest path that leads to the mailbox are so luminous that they constantly cut me off. God's needle has gone into all sorts of fabrics whose richness I never tire of admiring. Clinging to the raft of beauty."

or expressed for example in *L'épuisement* and *L'éloignement du monde*.

*Nous passons notre
vie devant une porte sans voir qu'elle
est grande ouverte et que ce qui est
derrière est déjà là, devant nos yeux.*⁵⁸

Christian Bobin, *L'éloignement du
monde*

The urge, in other words, is to learn how to recover the emptitude of things in the midst of the overflow of society and the world. And one way of doing so is through a particular type of poetic experience, again not by learning the moral values that the poem may teach us, but by experiencing the ethicality the poetic configuration may set in motion with its emptying words, its musical silence. Instead of being a "*pensée de la présence sur fond de disparition*,"⁵⁹ the poetic word becomes a thinking of emptitude in motion. And far from being the occasion for self-indulging pleasure, Bobin's poetics awakens us to the ethical fundamental of the voice of the voiceless. This is where lies the philosophical nature of his poetic prose.

⁵⁸ Bobin, *L'éloignement du monde*, 29. "We spend our life in front of a door without seeing that it is wide open and that what is behind is already there, before our eyes."

⁵⁹ Badiou, *Que pense le poème*, 71.

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