

## Ontological Excess and the Being of Language

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### Abstract

This paper engages in a close reading of Badiou's *Being and Event* as an occasion to investigate the ways in which being and language may be related and does so by focusing upon his idea that mathematical language, in the form of set theory, is capable of managing the 'ontological excess' which he associates particularly with poetic language. Because, he argues, poetic language involves a sort of willful engagement with the 'one-effect', the presencing of multiplicity, and thereby the only possibility for being's emergence, is made unfeasible. The paper locates some of the affects of excess in the experience of modernism, and specifically in the poetic language of Mallarmé and Baudelaire. By considering what might be involved in 'the saying-showing power of language', as this idea is developed by both Wittgenstein and Heidegger, the paper seeks to show how excess is the very source of beings' appearance in language, given that this appearance is silent and hence unsayable.

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### Introduction

This paper is concerned with examining the relationship between the one and the many as a ubiquitous problem for philosophical thinking generally and for ontology particularly. It engages in a close reading of Alain Badiou's *Being and Event* because this text offers a detailed analysis of how we might try to think about the relationship. Badiou's text is treated as an occasion, in the most respectful sense, to address how thinking, writing or speaking could come to terms with the issues that he raises. At stake is whether 'the one-effect' may be conceived in its completeness and, in particular, whether mathematics, specifically set theory, is the means for achieving this end.

The difficulty lies with the need to render, or designate, individuals as parts of a totality, given that 'rendition' or 'designation' — in whatever form — generates a surplus or excess over the totality. The designation creates a one-effect in what will be called its mode of transcendence. Excess transcends the totality that rendition sought to designate. But equally, each individual constitutes a totality of its own parts, where each part is one. This is the one-effect in what will be called its mode of reduction.

Since the question of the one and the many concerns itself with a relationship, issues of structure call for consideration. Any words that could be found which might begin to outline such a structure would need to address themselves to the processes of transcendence and reduction. Transcendence arises in the implication that any naming of the one - by the act of naming itself - would point to an entity greater than the sum of its parts. Hence, it is generally accepted that 'society', or 'the human body', has qualities which cannot be found in the aggregate of parts. Furthermore, these qualities are likely to be interpreted as the animating ones which make conception possible in the first place. It is already apparent, through the act of 'naming', that the use of language has significant implications for the production of the one-effect. It is the aggregate, or sum, which has traditionally been identified as 'the many'; the many are, at least potentially, the countable constituents of any totality. Accepting that the body has a finite number of countable parts allows us to think that we know when the body is complete or whole.

But, in the greatest effort to determine that which exists on the basis of that which can be counted, what should count as one part remains entirely uncertain. While language insists, if language-users are to be consistent and communicative, that what is called an arm is part of what is called a human body, there is no such insistence that the former is an irreducible part; that it is not itself composed of other parts. So what is to count as one part is, potentially, infinitely reducible.

It seems, then, that there are two ones: a one that is greater than the sum of its parts constituted as an infinite animating excess over and above a countable totality; a one that is infinitely reducible within a countable totality. Infinitude here marks the potentially limitless scope of excess, or expansion, and reduction: the space between galaxies and quanta. At the same time, it sets the limits for the countability of a totality by establishing the boundaries of a finite space.

But how might these two ones be related? What structure draws them together? Of course, one answer to these questions is that they are both one. But how can 'they' be

one? Surely, only one is one. How can the one be something else, something other than itself? How can the one be not-one?

Would it suffice to say that the one is a member of itself, that it is included in and belongs to itself? But Russell showed that “under certain circumstances a definable collection does not form a totality” (Jager, 1972, 157), so that the one could not belong to the definable collection of the totality without paradox; that the condition for the belonging of the one to itself is its exclusion from itself.

The conclusion that the condition for the one’s self-membership is its exclusion from itself was reached by Parmenides in the eponymous dialogue, according to Plato’s account (see, for instance, Plato, 1961). While holding that ‘reality is one’, Parmenides denies that the one can be predicated in any way. Each of eight antinomies denies the possibility of saying anything about the one, of giving it shape, place or movement, of rendering it the same or different from itself, or of it being in time. Generally, the antinomies argue that whether the statement ‘the one is’ is either denied or affirmed, an interlocutor must simultaneously deny and affirm contradictory predicates.

Parmenides’ statement also originates (or so a conventional history of ideas accepts) ontology - the logos of being. Hence, from the outset, a concern with the nature of being was impelled by the contradictions that are embodied in the antinomies. It was, perhaps, for this reason amongst others that Heidegger conceived ontology in the mode of questioning, as *Seinsfrage* (in Heidegger, 1962). The *Seinsfrage* refocused the question originally asked by Leibniz in 1714: why is there something, rather than nothing? Even so, ontology has probably been more concerned with *what* is and *how* it is: what does being entail and how is it manifest? Both of these questions arise in the thought that ‘the one is’.

For Alain Badiou, these questions receive their most rigorous and promising address through mathematics and, specifically, set theory. Badiou is apparently unsettled by what

he continuously refers to as the ‘impasse’ of conventional ontology:

the revolving doors of Plato’s ‘Parmenides’ introduce us to the singular joy of never seeing a conclusion arrive. For if being is one, the multiple, *is not*. But this is unacceptable for thought because what is presented is multiple and one cannot see how there could be an access to being outside presentation. (Badiou, 2005, 23).

Accordingly, he embraces the idea that mathematics is the ‘generic truth procedure’ of ontology and its traditional questions. It is in the (mathematical) understanding of multiplicity (the term that he uses for ‘the many’) that Badiou seeks to free himself from the revolving doors. Movement forward is secured by the decision to abandon the thought that ‘the one is’ in favor of an acceptance that ‘there is oneness’. This distinction makes it possible to ask: what could there be, which is not? Because it is multiplicity which presents itself, any access to being would arise in and through a consideration of multiplicity: multiplicity is presentation itself. But difficulties emerge from what might be involved in any ‘consideration’. Ontology is already removed from pure multiplicity since it is the ‘presentation of presentation’, or the re-presentation of multiplicity. While, for Badiou, this applies as much to mathematical ontology, the virtue of this orientation is that - in the form of set theory - being “is constrained to be sayable .... within the imperative effect of a law, the most rigid of all conceivable laws, the law of demonstrative and formalizable inference” (Badiou, 2005, 27). In this regard, Badiou distinguishes mathematical ontology from a Heideggerian poetics which interprets the history of ontology as withdrawal of being realized only through an appropriate poetic language.

Badiou’s project, then, is to open up an access to being *qua* being by confronting the ‘excess’ that traditional forms of ontology have always produced, where excess is the difference between presentation and re-presentation, the ‘one-effect’ that seems to be produced in considering any multiplicity. Although Badiou does not mention Derrida by name, ‘excess’ is the equivalent of the textual supplementation that Derrida associates with undecidability. For Badiou, mathematics makes it possible to be much more

decisive about undecidability than one may have supposed, since set theory offers the means to recognize, control and manage excess itself. The question that such a position raises in the present context is what manner of relationship to language does it presuppose? How, at a high level of generality, does human being's capacity for, and facility with, language incorporate excess, whether manageable or not? Does language which has a recognizably poetic form have a different sort of relationship to ontological excess than forms whose intent is more explanatory and propositional? Such questions are themselves part of the (ontological) tradition.

### **The Oneness which is Nothing**

The thought that 'there is oneness' leads Badiou to the conclusion that oneness is pure operation - an operational result of having a multiplicity. It is the consequence of the 'taking place', the presentation itself, of a multiplicity in a *situation*. The *structure* of a situation gives to its situation a count-as-one-effect, allowing number to occur within it, so "What will have been counted as one, on the basis of not having been one, turns out to be multiple" (Badiou, 2005, 24). Hence, the one, which is not, structures the multiple; it retroactively gives number to it, allowing it to be counted as that which is presented. For this reason, multiplicities may be either inconsistent or consistent: inconsistent prior to the operation of the count, consistent after the operation. But the play between inconsistency and consistency does not, of itself, make being *qua* being more accessible. While being may be included in any structured presentation, how it could be presented as being remains problematic. If it was heterogeneous to the one and to the multiple, it would, like the one, be nothing. On the other hand, if it was available for the count it would already have been transmogrified. It seems as though Badiou's account means that being has to be reckoned as immanence, as a becoming somewhere between nothing and stasis. Language here provides a means that might express the torsional retroactivity of this status: the future anterior. The 'will have been' expresses an anticipation of a future from which a hitherward glance would confirm it.

Badiou wants to claim that axiomatic set theory has the measure of this problem, since it conditions the operational effect of the one. The application of a number of ‘unreflexive’ (i.e. non-self-referential) set theoretical axioms makes ontology mathematical, and — in doing so — disassociates ontology from the poetical. The unreflexive nature of these axioms is also what, for Badiou’s translators, makes the axioms the “truth procedure(s) for an ontology in which being unfolds co-extensively with its inscription“ (Badiou, 2005, xxiii). Set theory operates upon presented inconsistent multiplicities by making consistency an immanent effect, but “avoids composition according to the one” (Badiou, 2005, 30). While pure multiplicity is what becomes consistent through the operation, it does so only on condition that presented multiplicity be regarded as inconsistent. Hence,

Ontology, axiom system of the particular inconsistency of multiplicities, seizes the in-itself of the multiple by forming into consistency all inconsistency and forming into inconsistency all consistency. It thereby deconstructs any one effect; it is faithful to the non-being of the one, so as to unfold, without explicit nomination, the regular game of the multiple such that it is none other than the absolute form of presentation, thus the mode in which being proposes itself to any access. (Badiou, 2005, 30).

Badiou shows how, in different Parmenidean antinomies, Plato contemplates the supposition both of inconsistent multiplicity and of the unavoidable necessity of the one for any concept of multiplicity. Whereas ‘dissemination without limits’ into the very atoms of being (what was earlier referred to as ‘infinite reducibility’) marks the pure presentation of inconsistent multiplicity, without the one such multiplicity is nothing (‘If the one is not, nothing is’). Counting this a nihilistic conclusion, Badiou re-configures it ... “if the one is not, what occurs in the place of the ‘many’ is the pure name of the void, insofar as it alone subsists as being” (Badiou, 2005, 35). It is this insight which ties Badiou’s thinking to the Cantorian logic of set theory, given that therein ‘the void’ has a name — the empty set — and a mark. Since no other explanation is given for why inducing the void is not also nihilistic, it is presumably the linkage to mathematics which makes nihilism avoidable.

## **The Name of the Void**

Giving the name of the void to the nothing of inconsistent multiplicity in the domain of pure presentation cannot afford to make nothing a term, for then it would be drawn into the count as what was, or could be, presented. Hence, the nothing of the void must remain inchoate. Just as the one was said to be nothing but the operational result of the count, the void is itself an uncounted aspect of that structured operation. Because it can be said that nothing can be subtracted from any presentation, any inconsistent multiplicity, the void is 'defined' as 'the subtractive suture of being'. Using a different terminology, one might say that the void could only ever be 'trace', a mark remaining from the un-presentation of being.

Being co-extensive with the one (which is nothing), the void likewise has infinite extension and infinite reducibility. It could be said to be both local and global, but equally that it is neither of these ".....but scattered all over, nowhere and everywhere: it is such that no encounter would authorize it to be held presentable" (Badiou, 2005, 55). Only in the event of the befalling of a particularly 'hazardous situation', might the void become 'retroactively discernible'.

From the perspective of ontology, thinking necessarily encounters, but without being able to count, the void. In Badiou's analysis, the void has to be the 'first' multiplicity — a conceptless multiple of nothing — because, otherwise, it would be subject to the one-effect. Hence the 'inaugural appearance of the void' engages an act of 'pure nomination' which, in turn, consumes itself.

In ontology, however, the unpresentable occurs within a presentative forcing which disposes it as the nothing from which everything proceeds. The consequence is that the name of the void is a pure *proper name* which indicates itself, which does not bestow any index of difference within what it refers to and

which auto-declares itself in the form of the multiple. (Badiou, 2005, 59).

Since ontology retroactively ‘forces’ the void as a space within the multiple, it is difficult to associate this with what seems here to be interpreted as an originary name belonging to presentation itself. The proper name has the power of appropriation but the need is to imagine a past (not a future anterior) when something like a self-consuming arche-word rendered the void as void. This would be equivalent to the thought in John’s gospel, but modified: in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with the void and the Word was the void. If the power of appropriation might more properly be seen as the power of language, the question which Badiou’s analysis raises draws one into considering how the void (which is ‘everywhere and nowhere’) appears in language. As the void must thereby be entangled with any ‘making in language’ (poiesis), the interest is to work through how this entanglement might be understood. Furthermore, the intersection of the void with the excess occasioned by re-presentation, and its proposed management within mathematical ontology, would call for consideration.

### **Excess and the Need for Metastructure**

The manageability of the excess which is produced within and by the structure of the one-effect requires another level of structure. While a retroactive perspective, expressed in the future anterior, may provide a means for conceptualizing how the elements of a multiplicity will have become subject to a count, it can not address itself to the excess that is thereby generated. Belonging and inclusion are the different, but related, functions the operation of which give structure to multiplicities. How the two functions are connected in any particular instance has consequences for the generation of excess such that, Badiou thinks, the rendition of a metastructure is necessary.

Belonging, which Badiou interprets as ‘originary’, operates when a multiplicity is counted as an element in the presentation of another multiplicity. Inclusion operates



when a multiple is a subset of another multiple. One multiple belongs to another if it constitutes an element which can be counted within it. One multiplicity is included in another when every element within the first is also presented by the second. Russell's observation that 'under certain circumstances' a definable collection does not form a totality can be re-configured in terms of belonging and inclusion, so that a multiple may not be included in a totality to which it belongs. This distinction is 'built into' set theory in the form of the powerset (or set of subsets) axiom, which establishes an operational difference between the idea of the existence of a set and the existence of a set of all the first set's subsets, such that if a set exists so does the set of its subsets. The multiples that *belong* to a set are nothing more than the set itself; the set of multiples *included* in a set constitute a new set. The concept of the set of a set's subsets appears to be imperative because it authorizes the notion that there are 'multiplicities of multiplicities'. But it is precisely the function of the powerset axiom which creates a double counting: the counting of a multiplicity when its multiples are taken to belong to the set; the counting of a multiplicity as it is re-presented when the subsets of the multiplicity are included in the count. The double counting is the site and cause of excess. In any set, the subsets of all the sets included in that set is in excess of it; this subset never belongs to the set. The set of subsets is the one, so the one is pure excess (up to the point that metastructure 'constrains' it) never belonging to the set whose subsets it collects. But the one is nothing, it is the void. It is because any and every set generates its own excess that it was said that the void is everywhere (and nowhere).

Badiou is concerned to control excess by designating a metastructure which subsists in a *state of the situation*. Metastructure collects the set of subsets, the 're-presentation' of what a set presents, so that this set may not only be included in a count but belong as well. Of course doing this simply repeats, or — in relation to time — one might say 'defers', the point of excess. Now excess emerges when one contemplates the set of subsets that are included in the metastructure. Again this set is included in the count, but does not belong.

Recognizing this, Badiou gives the name *excescence* to metastructural excess. Accepting that there are techniques for controlling, by way of minimalizing, any form of excess, he embraces the idea of hierarchy. A hierarchy of sets, in which each level of the hierarchy could only collect multiplicities, or elements, from the level below it would, he thinks, serve this purpose. The problem with such hierarchies, as with Russell's theory of types, is that whatever is expressed as belonging to a set must not be one of the set, so if the idea of metastructural hierarchy is itself part of set theory it is an idea about itself. If self-reference is eliminated the idea of metastructural hierarchy is eliminated. In consequence, because Badiou's analysis is inevitably a representation of set theory, it doubles it, so that while being included, it does not belong to it. It is excessive. Furthermore, what is excessive is mathematically errant. It undermines the very concept of the count since the aporia between a 'situation' and its state (prescribed metastructurally) opens up the infinity of the void. The idea of metastructural hierarchy is further confounded, as will be considered, by the way in which the language of its exposition constitutes a double counting.

### **The Axioms of Set Theory**

In addition to the powerset axiom, set theory recognizes eight other axioms (extensionality, union, replacement, separation, foundation, infinity, void and choice). They constitute operational rules for showing how multiplicities, and multiplicities of multiplicities, can be related particularly through belonging and/or inclusion. With the exception of the axiom of choice, they do not — and do not need to — presuppose existence because they are conditionals of the 'if ...then' sort. Nevertheless, whether and, if so, how, the axioms constitute a language remains open to question. If the creation of excess is somehow foundational to language then, as the following argument will indicate, set theory is clearly a language in this sense. These questions become most unrelenting in a consideration of the axiom of the void set. Various inscribed by Badiou, it nominates a state where "there exists that to which no existence can be said to belong" (Badiou, 2005, 67) and, with regard to it, "being lets itself be named, within the

ontological situation, as that from which existence does not exist” (Badiou, 2005, 68). The paradoxical quality of both these statements arises from an endemic excess: the excess which is generated by the difference between existence and non-existence, but also in relation to the being of the statements in the light of what they proclaim. While the void set is unique, its function most ineluctably belongs to language: its cogniscence relies entirely upon the proper name given to it. Its symbol, the “old Scandinavian letter,  $\emptyset$  ... zero affected by the barring of sense” (Badiou, 2005, 69) while marking a region ‘liminal to language’ is also made effable by it.

The single existential axiom, the axiom of choice, holds that whichever particular elements belonging to a multiplicity can be accepted as standing for it is always a matter of operational choice. So choice is an operational principle in relation to the substitutability of elements, but it also appears to be relevant in terms of an original decision about belonging itself. While the axiom of extensionality makes it possible to show how multiplicities can be differentiated, questions related to membership itself appear to be left to the axiom of choice. The axiom of choice is formulated on the basis of ‘intervention’. One has to make a choice in order to begin the game and, somehow, the act of choosing must be declared in and by the game, even though there can be no procedure for displaying the functioning of the choice. What has to be recognized is that the choice, any choice, is ‘illegal’ in that a decision is being made about something already understood to be undecidable. Badiou claims that such a decision is desirable because it “ultimately function(s) in the service of order and even ... of hierarchy” (Badiou, 2005, 231). If the grounds for belonging are made variable by the operation of the axiom of choice, and by its effect upon other axioms, it is the void set particularly for which this has consequences: in the void set belonging breaks down completely; in the void, nothing belongs.

### **The Constructible Universe**

The logic of set theory relies upon a particular orientation to language. Badiou recognizes

the ‘sovereign power of language’ by identifying set theory’s use of a radical nominalism. If linguistic nominalism, specifically in the form of its usual polarization from realism (or from ‘essentialism’), means that everything that can be communicated in and by the sharing of language is achieved by the power of names and naming, then nothing essential belongs to the things to which the names refer. Indeed, a thorough-going nominalism holds that there is nothing in language *but* the names, or — more generally — the words. From this perspective, language can be viewed as a neutral system lying ready-to-hand and awaiting use. While contemporary nominalism drew much of its resources from the later Wittgenstein’s work in which meaning in language is construed as use, by the same token a certain utilitarianism is reflected in its orientation. It is for this reason that Badiou is able to associate nominalism with the philosophy of constructivism and — drawing specifically upon Godel’s original conception — the idea of a constructible universe. The association is also influenced by the author’s nominalist reading of Leibniz’s philosophical system.

Although having reservations about Leibniz’s thought, its constructivist character recommends itself to Badiou in that language has ‘sovereign power’ through the capacity to balance the multiplicity of infinitely divisible being with ‘intrinsic nominations’ provided by language. What is implied, then, by ‘the sovereign power of language’ is not that language may be overwhelming, but that its power can be manipulated by language-users in order to construct a universe appropriate to their will.

Specifically, Badiou accepts that the capacity of language to assign properties and to bestow names — by way of formulae, variables, parameters, etc. — is indicative of a ‘logical grammar’ which allows one to define the ‘interiority’ of a situation. On this basis, any excrescence which doubling generates in the difference between a situation and its current state can be known and controlled. The creation of ‘constructible sets’, in which a multiplicity can be shown to belong to one level in a constructible hierarchy, is conceivable when the naming power of language is used appropriately. Hence, the acceptance of the ‘sovereignty of language’ facilitates the construction of a universe in

which the several axioms of set theory are true in that universe. This means, Badiou asserts, that the truth of the axioms is relative to the constructibility of a universe but also absolute within it. For the same reason, the coherence of such a universe is purely 'internal'; like the programming that constructs a video game its rules are indefeasible, the 'truth procedures' that govern the game making possible the range of choices that arise within it.

One consequence of holding to the linguistic nominalism which underpins constructivism is that language is interpreted as a self-enclosed system. But if it is self-enclosed the defining feature of language must be its self-referentiality. It is a quality which coincides with the 'interiority of a situation', so that this aspect of the situation becomes conceivable precisely because language itself, in its self-referentiality, is taken to be an 'interiorized' system. Yet, in claiming that the axioms of set theory are conditionals ("if...then"), their self-referentiality is not only specifically denied by Badiou and his translators, but the axioms' status as truth procedures for an unfolding of being co-extensive with their inscription is accepted. The situation is highly complex: with the exception of the axiom of choice, the axioms do not appear to rely upon any givens - they are *not* formulated as propositions whose predicates simply repeat their subjects in an act of self-reference. Nevertheless, in being the bounded constituents of a constructed universe, they have nothing outside themselves to which to refer, so as the indexical markers of their universe they *are* self-referential; the orientation of 'radical nominalism' towards language ordains it as a self-referential, interiorized system - the same qualities that are objectivized in and as the constructed universe of set theory. The doubling that seems to occur here has the quality of a reflected perception: a narcissism in which the language used to inscribe the truths of set theory appears to repeat itself in its own structure. This is a reflection which constructs the very escape route from double counting; that is, double counting is double counted and the hierarchy which was supposed to minimize it allows it to flourish.

### **Poetry and the Contingency of Events**

Because Badiou accepts that the task and accomplishment of mathematical ontology is to minimize excess, he considers that it cannot conceive of historical rupture nor, therefore, of the events which can occur with such disruption. Just as the presentation of multiplicities generally was taken to be incoherent up to that moment when the one-effect, retroactively conditioned, makes them coherent, events — arising from ‘evental sites’ — are unpredictable and contingent. Mathematical ontology “demonstrates that the event is not” (Badiou, 2005, 190) because it judges that these properties are a consequence of the self-referentiality of events, when the happening of the event is filtered through the consciousness of those affected (the example given is the French Revolution), lending to what transpires an element of self-belonging and thus generating the double count which promotes excess. Hence, for mathematical ontology, evental sites resist pressures of coherency and order: they are ‘singular multiplicities’ which belong in a situation but are not included in it, presented but not represented. The origin of events in evental sites means that when events do arise their occurrence reflects a contingency which can be equated with the operation of chance.

Badiou values poetic language, and particularly the poetry of Mallarmé and Hölderlin, because it mirrors these qualities. A close reading of Mallarmé’s *A Cast of Dice* enjoins a poetic vision of chance and undecidability (for an earlier analysis of Mallarmé’s relationship to undecidability see Derrida, 1981):

If poetry is an essential use of language, it is not because it is able to devote the latter to Presence; on the contrary, it is because it trains language to the paradoxical function of maintaining that which — radically singular, pure action — would otherwise fall back into the nullity of place. Poetry is the stellar assumption of that pure undecidable, against a background of nothingness, that is an action of which one can only *know* that it has taken place inasmuch as one *bets* upon its truth. (Badiou, 2005, 192).

The weight thrown upon ‘knows’ and ‘bets’ marks the distance, for the author, between mathematics and poetic language. In regard to making being accessible, the truth

procedures of set theory constitute a knowing because they co-inscribe being and truth. Poetic language mirrors pure chance so the possibility of its encounter with being consists in a cast of dice. And yet..... if events themselves are contingent and unpredictable, poetic inscription could be said to witness a more measured response. If poetry lives in and with the excesses that its configuration brings into being, a consequent ‘availability for interpretation’ may be the occasion for ‘poetic undecidability’, but surely not of a quality which would lead one to think that Badiou’s deployment of Mallarmé’s poetry was itself a matter of chance, or that he had ‘bet upon its truth’. Expressed differently, one may quite legitimately ask of a poem for the form and origins of its truths — whether or not these reside in the excesses of a revelatory call — without recourse to notions of chance. Presumably, the hearing of such a call would be the prime purpose of any close reading (including Badiou’s).

Even so, the author feels the need to place a bet. Indeed, one can only know, he says, on *condition* of the bet. On this reading, poetry is revelatory precisely in its witnessing of undecidability and therein, presumably, lies its being. It shows what has to be transcended by an act of pure courage so that one ‘decide(s) from the standpoint of the undecidable’.

The making of a decision constitutes a ‘forcing’ which commits a subject to the ordering and coherence associated with a hierarchical ranking. Whether poet or reader, “we are submerged in the mother tongue without being able to contort ourselves to the point of arriving at a separated thought of this immersion” (Badiou, 2005, 376) and, again, the only remedy for this is the construction of a hierarchy in which terms are assigned to a ‘nominal rank’. Badiou’s reading of Mallarmé’s poetry is made possible by just such an identification. Quoting the poet himself, Badiou attests that Mallarmé recognizes the site of his own work in the context of a particular literary situation marked by the ‘crisis in verse’ which arose after Hugo, and that the poet’s self-placing categorizations will become veridical “in the situation to-come in which this truth exists (that is, in a universe in which the ‘new poetry’ posterior to the crisis in verse, is actually presented and no

longer merely announced)” (Badiou, 2005, 404-5). Interestingly, this account of ordering and making coherent eschews the future anterior in favor of a simple predictive sense of ‘things to come’. But can poetry live in the time of its making only as ‘announcement’ of a hypothesized future? Can it work as poetry if its only function is to mark a desire for its own flowering in a future which alone would complete it? An account which defines poetry only according to its sitedness, sacrifices every possibility of an interpretive reading for a notion of self-actualization in and as an event.

For Badiou, it is also what makes a subject possible, this possibility arising when the self is actualized in/as the event:

A subject uses names to make hypotheses about the future. But, given that it is *itself* a finite configuration of the generic procedure from which a truth results, one can also maintain that a subject uses names in order to make hypotheses about itself.... Here, language (*la langue*) is the fixed order within which a finitude.... practises the supposition of reference to come..... Nomination is solely empty inasmuch as it is full of what is sketched out by its own possibility. A subject is the self-mentioning of an empty language. (Badiou, 2005, 399-400).

Mallarmé, it appears, was just such a subject. It may be re-assuring to learn that the wager placed from the standpoint of the undecidable can be made with confidence, but — if so — the metaphorical significance of a cast of dice becomes dubious. It does so because *any* decision will do the job of ending the paralysis conditioned by undecidability. Any decision constitutes a forcing in which the subject’s being is realized and — further — realized in truth. Badiou apparently provides no way of preventing the trivialization of the processes and procedures that he analyzes: one asks oneself if one’s needs will be met by shopping or mowing the lawn and the decision to engage in either activity ensures its truth and one’s being, where one’s expectation of a future state of fulfillment is negotiated by nomination in ‘an empty language’. So what is true is what happens (the event) and what happens is the true, brought into being by the ‘forcing decision’ of a subject “...at a point where language fails” (Badiou, 2005, 430)



Different senses of language seem to be at play in Badiou's analysis without being fully explicated. They come to the fore when the idea of a radical nominalism is contrasted with the interpretation embedded in the quotation above from pp. 399-400, where language (*la langue*) is the fixed order of an empty system (in this sense, of course, language cannot 'fail'). Saussure's distinction between *langue* and *parole*, where the latter comprises the multiple possibilities of speech for which *langue* is generative, could be usefully applied to the senses of Badiou's conception. Foucault's separation of language as experience and language as use would be similarly relevant, the former referring to the subject's orientation to the essential absence, consequent upon the death of God, of anything *in* language, apart from its sovereign power; the latter to particular applications of that power in practice (see particularly Foucault, 1994)

Indeed, the binary distinctions identified above can be seen as having the same phenomenal form as the relationship whose unraveling lies at the centre of Badiou's work: the relationship of multiplicity (the many) with the one. From this standpoint the one is *la langue*: the voidal structure which authorizes and gathers up a multiplicity of particular acts of speech, writing and non-verbal communication. To make such a claim would involve accepting that there was no essential difference between the one/many and the language/speech relationships. There is no compunction to think that either one of these is originary.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to trace the resonances of the one/many in the language/speech relationship, except to suggest that the tropological character of language — specifically in the workings of synecdoche and metonymy, and in the more general connection between these and metaphor — functions as re-configurations of the one/many relationship.

If it might be said of the general power of language that it enfolds as it unfolds, some sense of one's belonging to language needs to resonate alongside the sense of utilitarian nominalism which, despite his acceptance that "we are submerged in the mother tongue

without being able to contort ourselves to the point of arriving at a separated thought of this immersion” (Badiou, 2005, 376) dominates Badiou’s thinking and the desire for nominal ranking.

### **Being-in-Language**

Commenting upon the supposed contradiction in Saussurian linguistics which suggests that speakers and hearers of a language would have to know it in order to learn it, Maurice Merleau-Ponty argues that

the objection is the same kind as Zeno’s paradoxes; and as they are overcome by the act of movement, it is overcome by the use of speech. And this sort of circle, according to which language, in the presence of those who are learning it, precedes itself, teaches itself, and suggests its own deciphering, is perhaps the marvel which defines language. (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, 39).

Merleau-Ponty’s insistence on the circular trajectory of language gives it the character of the pregiven, but there is also the suggestion that a consequent generation of paradox might at least be suspended by the act of speaking (or, presumably, writing). This is an idea which does not recognize that circularity may promote the doubling which Badiou’s interpretation draws out. But neither, therefore, does it conceive of a constant production of excess, the very source of paradox, nor of the remedial need for hierarchical ranking .

Merleau-Ponty’s comment draws attention to an experience of being-in-language. But to say that one is *in* language would indicate a twofold ‘directionality’ embodied in a recognition that one is in the midst of a definable collection which does not form a totality. One recognizes oneself as a sentient being, as a one within whom a certain life world, certain habits and thought patterns are collected and also re-collected. This is a world that one knows intimately, that breeds the familiar; it is ... oneself. But the self that one is creates a double through re-collection, a double whose words echo down the

empty corridors of language resonating in untold ways, untold and so beyond one's means to totalize. One might say that one belongs to a totality, the totality of one, in which one is not included as one ... until, perhaps, one speaks again and totality is temporalized, momentarily suspended as self-identity is re-made through inclusion. The experience of being-in-language hence confers self-identity, one's oneness, while — and perhaps simultaneously — revealing the essential incompleteness of the one, burdened with excess, who enunciates. How else to hope for completion except through another round, another accounting?

The humors transposed here may provide a point of recognition for entering poetic language. Gerald Bruns shows how such concerns lie at the heart of the poetic experience of modernism. Identifying “two genealogies”, Bruns (2006) traces, within the French context, the differing responses of Baudelaire and Mallarmé, given that the contemporary displacement of the subject provides a shared motif. For Baudelaire, such displacement is founded in the non-identity of the poet; this is the poet as *flaneur*, a figure completely absorbed into the life of the street where transience and anonymity condition existence, as they characterize the literary work. By contrast, the subject's displacement is, for Mallarmé, the source of a mystical ecstasy consequent, as well, upon the poet's struggle with a God who is defeated or disappears from language, so that words are no longer symbols but ‘agents of their own activity’. Bruns shows how the experience of subject displacement inflects the voices of others, including Bataille, Blanchot and Foucault:

Forgetting, waiting, attention, suffering, exhaustion, fascination, abandonment, dying, madness - and poetry... These are the canonical forms of experience explored by Bataille and Blanchot ... (so that) the experience of language is not a first-person experience; it is an experience of obsession - of being besieged or gripped by language as by something that cannot be got rid of, like the immanence of death. (Bruns, 2006, 74-75).

So what appears to typify the modernist experience, as Bruns sees it, is an acceptance that

language uses us, that it constantly reinforces the subjecthood of the subject: the usual sense of what it means to be a 'language-user' is inverted. The modernist response is then to do what one can to free oneself from this occupying power, whether through self-effacing immersion or by an ecstatic transformation enacting the desire to let the words play among themselves, to give language back to itself so that it recovers from its contemporary estrangement and, in doing so, removes its hold.

The contemporary experience of being-in-language can be configured as a conditionality borne of excess. The connection between all of the arts and excess is Dionysian. While this may lead the poet to celebrate language as the fecund ground for ecstatic invention, so that excess itself is equally celebrated, Nietzsche's thought that words have passed through too many lips to any longer contain the truth about anything seems also to be a rendering of excess. More recently, the literary response to excess seems to run the gamut of feelings that Bruns outlines. Excess breeds a poetry in which 'meaning' becomes opaque, so that the words have no relation to anything but themselves - akin to a poetizing species of nominalism. 'Wordedness', perhaps in the form of vocability, contains the poem's entire sense, as in — it may be suggested — Charles Bernstein's writings.

But equally, excess is the measure of the distance between writerly desire and the words themselves, so — in the inability to imprint one's desire — all is lost. The relationship between language-use and the experience of loss is profound, as Lacan has shown. Bruns shows that, for Bataille, poetry is creation by means of loss, figured as 'a non-productive expenditure of language', where expenditure ceases to be symbolic but is given over to a representational function in which one's life becomes assumed into the materiality of language (Bruns, 2006, 73).

Both responses to excess constitute, at the same time, an orientation to the void. In a poetry which accepts that there is nothing but the words, the void is emergent in the disavowal of anything extrinsic, in the intent that nothing is meant, as well as —

locally — in the space between words. Polarities seem reversed in the thought of poetry as loss since the void rests in a memorialization from which, infusing itself in the materiality of language, it comes. As the other side of excess, in either case, the void may hold its own attractions, itself the source of a desire which impels speaking or writing; or, indeed, silence.

If these are forms of life that modernism discovers in relation to language, then the question of how it is possible to live a life so formed, accepting that the mathematical language of set theory turns out to be inimical to this challenge, remains unaddressed. What understanding of, or orientation to, language would offer some relief from a self-negating that seems embedded in the modernist perspective? Both Wittgenstein and Heidegger contemplate, in thinking about language as a saying-showing, a domain in which some forms of experience, whilst unsayable, nevertheless silently appear: a thinking which may be fruitfully linked to Badiou's account of excess, voidedness, belonging, inclusion and being.

### **Language as Saying-Showing: Wittgenstein**

Badiou's contention that the presentation of presentation (ontology) is always different from what presents itself as multiple being appears to leave him indifferent to the thought that such difference is, in turn, a product of identity. As a theory of ontological difference, it pays little or no heed to ontological identity, or therefore to the belonging-together of difference and identity.

Expressing the question concerning identity in metaphorical terms, one may sensibly enquire of a picture the degree of its 'likeness' to its referent object while accepting that it is different from what it pictures. Indeed, difference is a condition for making judgments of pictorial likeness at all. This issue of resemblance, correspondence or — in semiotic terminology — iconicity has a primary significance in Wittgenstein's theory of language as it emerges in the *Tractatus*.

What has been called Wittgenstein's 'picture theory of language' relies upon the interpretation that the world, the thoughts that conceive it, the propositions that make claims about its nature and the language in which these are expressed have the quality of 'facticity' since they exist in a correspondential relationship with each other. Collectively, they constitute a picture of reality as such and, hence, provide the basis of any sensical claim that may be made about it, where such claims are also the subject-matter of logical analysis. But these qualities pertain only to what the language can be used to *say*. Given that the theory is pre-committed to the metaphorical value of 'the picture', this trope confers the power to say how other things might be related in certain ways, but at the cost of not being able to say anything about itself; 'the picture' — or more precisely, its metaphorical value — is confined entirely to a showing. Aware of the difficulties caused in Frege's and Russell's logical systems by self-referential propositions, Wittgenstein was led to make a distinction between saying (*sagen*) and showing (*zeigen*):

What expresses *itself* in language, *we* cannot express by means of language. Propositions *show* the logical form of reality. They display it.... What *can* be shown, *cannot* be said. (Wittgenstein, 1997, 4.121 - 4.1212).

In the example of the picture, it is apparent that what cannot be said but only shown is what is essential to the theory: the metaphorical value of the picture, metaphoricity itself. Generally, Wittgenstein held that what was essential to any proposition could only be shown, never said. Hence, whatever is taken to be 'the essence of mathematics' cannot be propositionally expressed, but only shown performatively. This is why a 'theory of set theory' can never say anything about set theory. Of course, this would equally apply to the present writing: writing which proclaims that its theme is 'the being of language' can say nothing about language, only show it through its writing practices. That which exegesis can say nothing about must be found unsayable and unsayability is the occasion for silence. Wittgenstein construed this in the now well-known saying that "Whereof one

cannot speak, thereof one must be silent” (Wittgenstein, 1997, 6.55). But that about which one can only be silent is that which the essential is. The thought that only what is essential can be associated with what can only be silently shown has implications for a re-conceptualization of the one, as will be shown.

The being of silence will also need to be considered. Wittgenstein’s analysis emphasizes that silence is a consequence of unsayability — that what is shown cannot be said — but what also calls for recognition is that *something* must be said in order for anything to be shown. Silent showing cannot occur without saying, so the quality of the silence being considered is likely to be different from a silence arising from the absence of any saying at all. It is simply that *what* is said fails to capture what, in being said, it shows - and this is the work of pure excess. Showing always exceeds the saying that gave rise to it, so what was said always misses what it shows. Hence, the being of silence in silent showing calls for a careful listening to the saying from which it arose.

### **Language as Saying-Showing: Heidegger**

Although Heidegger’s own analysis of language is of course written in prose form, its topic and resource is poetry. In his consideration of Trakl’s poetry he is led to the conclusion that

The poet’s statement remains unspoken. None of his individual poems, nor their totality, says it all. Nonetheless, every poem speaks from the whole of the one single statement, and in each instance, says that statement. From the site of the statement there rises the wave that in each instance moves his Saying as poetic saying. But that wave, far from leaving the site behind, in its rise causes all the movement of Saying to flow back to its ever more hidden source” (Heidegger, 1971a, 160).

For Heidegger, all of Trakl’s poems point back to one poem which is never spoken; but poetic Saying is constantly at work, as the language bends back into itself enriching the unspoken ‘poet’s statement’. Furthermore, it is this one poem which is the meaning of all

the poems that are spoken. Heidegger locates the site of this one poem as apartness (*die Abgeschiedenheit*).

In the poetry, Heidegger finds the saying of the poet's need and determination to follow 'something strange'. What is strange is embodied as the stranger (*Abgeschiedene*):

through the silvery night there rings the footfall of the stranger.  
(Trakl, G *Summer's End*, quoted by Heidegger 1971a, 165).

The stranger leads the poet away from the well-trodden paths of ordinary conversation, of idle talk, towards the land of evening (the occident, *Abendland*). Evening presages night. Night metaphorizes both an end and a (new) beginning. The withdrawal of light which marks the limit of day also precedes day. Night, and in Trakl's poetry particularly "blue night", is the origin and end of everything that is.

In Heidegger's estimation, Trakl's poetry engages silence in two ways. The silence of the one unspoken poem is matched by a silence metaphorized as night and towards which the poet's path leads.

As in Wittgenstein's account, Heidegger seems to accept that what is spoken or written can never capture the infinitude of language, even though language empowers saying and is instanced in and by it. Equally, it is for this reason that language and silence can be said to be one and the same. Therefore, for Heidegger, the only question to be asked of a poem concerns its propinquity to its origin and end in the silence of language and concerns, for this reason, the poet's listening:

The more poetic a poet is — the freer (that is, the more open and ready for the unforeseen) his saying — the greater is the purity with which he submits what he says to an ever more painstaking listening. (Heidegger, 1971a, 216)

Finally, it is the task of the thinker who authors an exegesis to withdraw into what will become another silence .... "the most difficult step of every exposition consists in



vanishing away altogether with its explanation in the fact of the pure existence of the poem” (Heidegger, 1967, 234-5).

There is a difference of tone and style, as well as evaluation, between the two interpretations of language and silence. Whereas Wittgenstein’s own language reflects an epistemic tradition grounded in logic and propositional analysis, Heidegger’s is responsive to a classical and literary one. It is for this reason that Heidegger identifies (poetic) saying as a grounding mode for human dwelling on earth (see particularly the essay *Poetically Man Dwells*) inimical to its definition as a source of disjuncture or errancy, although these may be qualities consistent with a ‘technological’ use of language.

In Heidegger’s thought that the word gives being to the thing, the work of language — strikingly conceived in saying — is to cast an enlivening luminescence on ordinary things, so that they appear in their explicitness and in their fullness. The task of language here is to avoid a naming which would be fully satisfied by making the thing disposable, or by designating it as a mode of equipment for human use. Because the word cannot *say* the thing in its specificity, the being of the thing is given as a gift through the word’s power of showing and, since this is silent, human being is free to let be the thing in its own mode of being. The showing constitutes the thing’s appearance both as its semblance, outward aspect or ‘look’, and as its coming into being.

The interpretation of language that Heidegger develops in thinking about the relationship between saying and silent showing belongs in a broader understanding in which thinking, language, human being (*Dasein*) and being as such belong-together. Humans are the beings for whom thinking makes being an issue, and this thinking is accomplished through the saying and silent showing of language. The belonging-together which occurs here is an event of mutual appropriation (*Ereignis*). Of course, Heidegger’s injunction to *listen* cannot guarantee the authenticity of what will be heard since what is shown will be unsayable: showing is not a concrete or empirical matter which can be made accountable

in terms of what is shown.

Writing about Husserl, Derrida (1973) has subjected the idea of the ‘silent phenomenological voice’ to a deconstructive critique because, for him, it constitutes a mode of pure auto-affection in which the self becomes idealized. The soundlessness of the voice bestows an apparent transcendence since the absence of sound is a manifestation of the voice’s interiority and hence the guarantor of self-presence. Applied to Heidegger’s thought, this critique bolsters Derrida’s sense that that thought constitutes a metaphysics of presence. But like Heidegger, Derrida interprets the absence of sound as an injunction that “(Here) we must listen” (Derrida, 1973, 74). What might be heard if one were to listen closely to Heidegger’s own, and frequently criticized, silences is an expression of the tragedy of *Dasein*.

### **The Language of Ontological Excess**

The interpretation that human being, thinking, language and being as such are mutually appropriated in a relationship of belonging-together does not receive much succor from Badiou’s contention that

If poetry is an essential use of language, it is not because it is able to devote the latter to Presence; on the contrary, it is because it trains language to the paradoxical function of maintaining that which .... would otherwise fall back into the nullity of place (Badiou, 2005, 192).

Presumably Badiou accepts that an ‘essential’ use of language is feasible, even if poetry fails to embody it, but this suggests that language — if not poetry — can be the bearer of essences. In circumstances where poetry might involve an encounter with essence, however, a devotion to presence is not achievable: an essential use of language always entails its ‘training’ so that language is commanded to bring into the being of a recognizable place what, without it, would have fallen back into nothingness, into the

void. Hence, 'essential language' — or it may be preferable to think of 'the essence of language' — performs the double (and therefore paradoxical) work of both creating a place where its work is done (one may wish to think of this work as the opening of a 'clearing' - *die Lichtung*) and which, at the same moment, broaches the nothingness from which it came and which borders it.

Badiou's criticism seems to be that poetry *willfully* encourages paradox, at least to the extent that it 'trains' language to produce it. This complaint would be a predictable emanation of an account which sought to rationalize and manage the excesses of language, and — of course — this is exactly what a training regimen would wish to achieve. But, as has been suggested, excess can be experienced as Dionysian vigor and fecundity, even though this may only be released in a silent showing. Badiou's own use of language (use *by* language) may be experienced in just such a way: the uncovering of its inherent paradoxes opens up an extraordinarily fruitful terrain. This is a landscape in which essential and historically germinated ideas and processes spring into newly variegated forms of life so that a reader is drawn into the language-field in unsurpassed ways.

Exploring this terrain allows one to understand, from its vantage points, how the 'presentation of multiple being', in its incoherency, is always already in language and hence coherent, not only through the torsional activity of the future anterior but as an affect of language as a whole. This immersion has already doubled presentation in the shadowplay of saying-showing, and this then re-doubled into silence in the two senses of showing's appearance.

If the import of Heidegger's statement that the word gives being to the thing is taken, then the excess produced by this doubling, far from making being inaccessible, is its very source.

Language is unavoidably self-referential, even if the work of showing (what a

language-user was never able to say) is inevitably work for Other; so it is in language's power of bending-back that essences are silently shown. Wittgenstein's insight that what is essential (to any proposition) can only be shown attests to the gift of being made by the word.

Excess, now realized in and as the difference between what is shown and what is said, remains the site of undecidability. Badiou's contention that what undecidability shows is only that a decision, nevertheless, *must* be made stands its ground. In the understanding that undecidability, in the form of paradox, is a relational or structural problem, it resides in the interplay of belonging and inclusion as these are now re-focused in the saying-showing relationship. What is shown in any saying belongs to it in the sense that only *this* saying could have shown it; but what is shown is in excess of anything that was said, so is not a part of it, is not included in it.

Badiou's concern to put a name to the void and to conceive of it as 'the subtractive suture of being' can also be used to consider how saying-showing works. If the name of the void is the nothing of inconsistent multiplicity in the domain of pure presentation then words — the unstructured, random multiplicity of words — could be said to be the bearer of sutured being in the gap between saying and showing (although a stitchless suture, perhaps a furrow, would best image the relationship). His characterization of the void ("scattered all over, nowhere and everywhere: it is such that no encounter would authorize it to be held presentable" (Badiou, 2005, 55)) can equally be applied to silent showing. Expressed more directly, the absence of sound — indeed of everything but space — marks the silence of the void, so that the void is silence itself, and this reigns 'nowhere and everywhere' - in and as language *qua* language, between saying and showing, in the revelatory qualities of showing itself, in the space between words.

If these are the terms upon which the relationship between the one and the many rests, upon which any rendition or designation relies, but cannot speak, then the dominant metaphor of structure: *situation, state of the situation, metastructure, nominal ranking*

seems to carry a meaning far too rigid to reveal the play of transcendence and reduction which reflects its movement. In *this* sense, one may say that Badiou's writing gives silent voice to the possibility of untrammelled journeys through its furrowed land, where one and many may be differently experienced.

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