BADIOU’S INAESTHETICS AND THE MODERN DILEMMA

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The predominance of post-modern thought in the latter half of the 20th century has brought philosophy to a crisis of confidence in its ability to investigate and understand our current reality. The complacent relativism that has emerged from post-modern discourse leaves us unprepared to face either the dominance of a dis-associative free-market or the emergence of regressive fundamentalist totalitarianism. Alain Badiou tasks philosophy with recovering the process of logical investigation into the primary forces which shape our lives, and he does so by equipping philosophy with both a means and an end: philosophy is a mathematical ontology in the endless pursuit of truth.

In an attempt to address the issues of infinitely relative position and totalitarian authority, I understand Badiou to draw most significantly from Wittgenstein’s notion of the situation and Heidegger’s notion of Being, placing both of these insights within the mathematical framework of set theory as informed by Paul Cohen, doing so in the distinctly Platonic spirit of an appeal to truth as the antidote to the sophistry of post-modern thought.

Such concerns with the intersection of authority and position are distinctly modern ones, and for Badiou we remain caught on the horns of the modern dilemma of
the undisputed Master and the infinite Place. The process of overcoming such a false dichotomy, Badiou suggests, involves a return to the scene of its founding in the century’s imagination, the moment of its poetic enunciation. Through an investigation of the critical and creative work of Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot between the wars, I present their striking awareness of this problem and their attempts to overcome it, focusing on their respective moments of success and failure as understood through a critique based on Badiou’s ethics and aesthetics.
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ABBREVIATIONS

AF – After Finitude (Meillassoux)
BE – Being and Event (Badiou)
C – Century (Badiou)
E – The Ethics (Badiou)
EC – Ecrits (Lacan)
EP Let - Ezra Pound: Selected Letters (Pound)
EW – Ezra Pound: Early Writings (Pound)
HA – Handbook of Inaesthetics (Badiou)
ID – Infinitely Demanding (Critchley)
IT – Infinite Thought (Badiou)
MQ – Modernist Quartet (Lentricchia)
NN – Number and Numbers (Badiou)
PE – The Pound Era (Kenner)
SP – Selected Poems (Eliot)
ST – Badiou: A Subject to Truth (Hallward)
SW – The Sacred Wood (Eliot)
WL MS – Wasteland: A facsimile of the original draft with annotations by Pound. (ed Valerie Eliot)
I – Seminar I (Lacan)
II – Seminar II (Lacan)
III – Seminar III (Lacan)
XI – Seminar XI (Lacan)

XVII – Seminar XVII (Lacan)

XX – Seminar XX (Lacan)

XXIII – Seminar XXIII (Lacan)
Introduction

“What is your ontology?”

J.A. Miller famously poses this question to Jacques Lacan at the opening of the analyst’s 11th seminar at the Ecole Normale Superieure in Paris, 1964, and a clear conception of ontology still struggles more than forty years later to find a place within the intellectual movements which continue to dominate critical theory (BE 4). It is for this reason that Miller’s question remains as important today as it was in the opening years of post-modern thought, and yet even at this moment in the early 1960s, a theorist such as Lacan, so often identified with the rise of post-modern theory, clearly recognizes the importance and implications of the notion of ontology.

Lacan finally admits, after some equivocation, that he believes the unconscious itself to be pre-ontological (XI 29).¹ For philosopher Alain Badiou, this response is momentous, as it confirms the simple necessity of a pre-ontological position from which to launch a process of enquiry, and Badiou credits Miller’s question as the instant of the exposure of this necessity. The very act of its enunciation, in a room in Paris in 1964, stands as a historical event for Badiou; it is the instant that marks for Badiou the point of his own intervention into philosophy. This is the moment, he re-iterates in so many of his texts, when the extent of the field which his own generation of thinkers must clear was first revealed.

Such a field must provide an extension for, as well as an overcoming of, the brand of thought which has been generally labeled post-modern, and the exploration of such a field remains a daunting but absolutely necessary task. In the wake post-modernism’s long dominance over critical thought, Badiou currently assesses the state of philosophy as completely irrelevant to the modern world. He believes that due to a crisis of confidence, philosophy has, since at least Heidegger, abandoned any certainty about its aims, its goals or even its uses. The greatest thinkers of the 20th century were what Badiou refers to as “anti-philosophers”: post-modern theorists whose ultimate goal was to show not what philosophy could do, but what it could not. The defining quality of such thought is a preoccupation with the finitude of the human in all its pathos. It is this very finitude that Badiou rejects through his mathematical engagement with infinity.

The decision of the anti-philosophers to systematically disable philosophy, resigning themselves to elucidations on the incapacity of thought, poses such a great danger today because what is most necessary, Badiou believes, is a robust philosophy which can understand myriad situations logically.

The intellectual circles which have for the past half century indulged in a complacent relativism fueled by a resigned nihilism are ill-equipped to deal with either the rise to dominance of free-market capitalism or with the very real world-wide emergence of forceful, regressive fundamentalism. Only logical, didactic processes of understanding the movements of modern society - a society made possible by these very processes – will enable its citizens to re-engage passionately and critically with the forces
that shape their lives; and the very backbone of these processes, this thinking, this 
philosophy, is a clear ontology. These are the stakes of Badiou’s project.

The project itself can be understood to emerge from a distinctly modern 
framework, concerned pre-eminently as it is with questions of position and authority and 
the schematization of those positions in the interest of locating what could be termed the 
real of Being. Such a conception of Being is an infinite one, and Badiou aligns himself to 
an infinite conception of Being, Being as “multiplicity,” in order to move past the 
finitude of the post-modern identity politic. Yet far from merely suggesting that the 
identification of such Being would re-inscript the dilemmas of position and authority, 
Badiou attempts to schematize this very process of change while critically investigating 
examples of when such events have historically, artistically or politically occurred.

It is my belief that the necessary attack which post-modernism has leveled at the 
concept of authority for the last fifty years has exceeded the bounds of its utility. 
Proceeding as it has without a check or balance to its investigation of difference, post-
modernism has effectively “flattened out” the Other into a complete relativity, leading to 
a situation in which all positions share equal validity, thereby making it impossible to 
make either a qualitative or quantitative judgment. The obscene underside of this 
situation is that if all else is reduced to equality, only the position of the speaker carries 
authority; this presents us with a universe filled solely with totalitarian subjectivities.

What a consideration of “ontology” provides is a check to the suicidal drive of 
post-modernism which seeks to endlessly split all enunciation into its constitutive 
components, while at the same time providing a check to the totalitarianism that lurks
once more at the edges of a universe rendered completely relative. The identity politics of the last decades, spawned as they have been by a finite conception of the subject incapable of accessing an infinite beyond in which it moves, have provided little more than a thin veil of legitimacy for the perpetual operation of power. Difference, Badiou points out in his *Ethics*, is obvious and infinitely present; what is more difficult - and more important - to locate are similarities. And yet if philosophy has demonstrated anything in last seventy years it is that language is by its very nature contingent; the location of meaning within it is a task full of endless possibility. It is to avoid these very pitfalls of finitude and language that Badiou turns to mathematics in order to articulate a clear ontology of infinite Being that is both resistant to contingency and purified of variable meaning. It is mathematics alone which allows Badiou to analyze situations from strictly relational standpoints in order to interrogate them for the presence of a *truth*.

It is truth, ultimately, that Badiou believes is most disastrously absent in a present-day conception of philosophy, and it is the pursuit and identification of truth to which Badiou aims his thought. If, Badiou believes, we can locate and understand that which is true, we can think past the current impasse of relativity or totalitarianism in which post-modern philosophy currently languishes. It is this very impasse, he believes, which has led to the rise of scientific discourse instead of philosophy as the arbiter of truth in our present-day society. But Badiou, far from engaging in tired arguments against the prevalence of scientific discourse, utilizes epistemic approaches in the interest of clearly defining his field of philosophical enquiry.
This is not to say that Badiou falls into the mold of an analytic philosopher; utilizing a scientific discourse to provide the focus for his intellectual investigations, Badiou then turns to the power of the poetic assertion to explode such a tightly compressed field from within. It is only with the unsubstantiated poetic assertion that the mathematic can reach beyond the bounds of itself and operate in the Void that surrounds it.

Philosophy, Badiou believes, must progress from its present state if the problems of the 21st century are to be coherently addressed by agents other than international markets and independent madmen. The rationale provided by the mathematical procedure, twinned with the unpredictable creativity of the artistic procedure, can then be united in an philosophy constructed and operated for the sake of understanding, and thinking through, the infinitely multiple world.

In an attempt to address the problem of relative position and totalitarian authority, I understand Badiou to draw most significantly from Wittgenstein’s notion of the situation and Heidegger’s notion of Being, placing both of these insights within the mathematical framework of set theory as informed by Paul Cohen, doing so in the distinctly Platonic spirit of an appeal to truth as the antidote to the sophistry of post-modern thought.

What I would like to focus on in this study is the poetic exploration of what Badiou terms the “modern dilemma”; namely, the false choice which modern thought has passed to us of whether to embrace either the complacent nihilism engendered by the illusions of free-market capitalism as expressed by liberal democracy, or the passion and
the terror offered by revolutionary and avant-garde movements. Of greatest interest to me is the intersection of language and number which seems to rest at the center of Badiou’s philosophy in the interlocking conditions of poetics and mathematics - in his terms, art and science.

In the interest of addressing the modern dilemma it is instructive, I believe, to retrace its rise to the opening of literary modernism; specifically, the critical work of both Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot, as their great modern poem *The Waste Land*. The roots of the modern dilemma, expressed powerfully in the text of the poem, can be traced in the practices and beliefs of these two writers, and it is through a consideration of their similarities and differences that I hope to sketch precisely how Badiou’s ontology enjoins to resolve the modern problem.

Badiou’s ontology itself is notoriously complex, and in the opening chapters I attempt to explicate its structure and process of movement, first elucidating the necessity for its intervention into thought, then its mathematical support in set theory, and finally its implications for poetry. My reading of Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent” through a specifically Badiouan lens is done in the interest of demonstrating how to critically utilize his philosophical apparatus while at the same time illustrating the points of intersection between his thought and Eliot’s. My reading of *The Waste Land* centers less on what the poem is than the circumstances that led to its production, keeping a clear emphasis on the contribution of Pound, who had, I believe, a more coherent understanding of the consequences of the poem in the larger scheme of modern thought. I conclude with a brief reading of Pound’s “Chinese Character as Medium for Poetry” in
which I detect strong similarities with the particulars of Badiou’s project and read Badiou as beginning, in a way, at the point at which Pound concludes.

The similarities present in Eliot, Pound and Badiou are a result of their distinctly modern concerns of authority and position in reference to truth, and sad to say these concerns are not as dated as may first appear. The conception of the finite subject lies at the heart of the modern dilemma. We can imagine how a tragic understanding of the situation gave rise to totalitarian subjectivity, which in turn gave rise to processes of usurpation of such authority and the concern with myriad position and a celebration of difference, which is, at bottom, a celebration of finitude.

The abandonment of the concept of truth by present-day thought has been to the great detriment of philosophy as a relevant discipline for understanding our world, and in the absence of philosophy’s influence, other regimes of thought have led us, particularly in the West, to a perpetual embrace of the transitory, where the constant deployment of irony is the best and only weapon of defense. To revisit the modern problem is in essence to re-engage the impasse that was never overcome, and Badiou stands as one of the first and strongest voices of a rising chorus which seeks to put an end to the relativity of the place without calling once more on the authority of a master. Indeed, as Badiou – and Pound and Eliot – suggest, we must aim to arrive at a stable place where the master never will have been.

My aim is to present Badiou’s system as a unified and functioning whole, in the interest of then deploying this system in original readings of classic texts. The interface
between Badiou’s project and literary critique is in actuality far from a smooth one. His own readings of literary works tend towards provocation, upsetting traditionally received notions of particular authors. Also notable in his approach is the narrow focus of his critiques; he often uses texts only to illuminate certain aspects of his thought, ignoring the history of a text’s reception. My treatment of particular authors in chapters one through three should be understood as explicatory. Certain aspects of Badiou’s thought (particularly his views of modernism and poetics) require an elucidation of his readings of these figures and my work regarding them is solely in the interest of clearly demarcating Badiou’s stated positions.

Putting aside for a moment that Badiou’s inaesthetics permits, if not encourages, the narrow brand of reading he executes, his ongoing critical engagement with Samuel Beckett is a noteworthy exception in that it is a sustained critique that is both nuanced and suggestive. In particular, Badiou’s reading of Worstward Ho! in his Handbook of Inaesthetics offers significant contributions to the understanding of Beckett as a writer.

Having little desire to stumble over ground that has already been admirably covered by Andrew Gibson in his Beckett and Badiou: Pathos of Intermittency, and further desiring to avoid a dogmatic approach in my readings, I have instead aimed to utilize certain points of Badiou’s philosophy as platforms from which to begin, using particular models as guides for my own thought in the examination of the given texts. In particular, my understanding of Eliot’s Ideal Order from “Tradition and the Individual Talent” would have been impossible without my investigation into Badiou’s take on Paul Cohen’s work. Also, my assertion that The Waste Land was “saved” by Pound from
Eliot’s excesses would be relatively empty without my use of Badiou’s differentiation between truth and simulacrum as described in his *Ethics*.

Further, I have chosen not to follow Badiou’s stated program for literary critique, based as it is in his notion of artwork-as-subject and constellation-as-truth as described in his *Handbook of Inaesthetics*. Indeed, according to that work, literary investigation should follow the model of his book *Century*, in which Badiou employs artworks in the service of the illustration of political arcs of truth. This method often flattens the artwork to a handful of already given essentials and robs the pieces he discusses of independent force. I have concerned myself instead with the operations of set theory as a way to speak about the artwork. While Badiou does not recommend this method it is faithful, I believe, to the overall drive of Badiou’s mathematical thought and his injunction to remember the nature and purpose of Plato’s unique intervention into Sophism.

The boundaries of the set are infinitely flexible, and the process described in *Being and Event* by which the emergence of a truth from outside the set drastically re-aligns the values of the elements of the set - in effect changing the reality of the set - is an eminently useful method for understanding how change occurs. Whether that change is, as in my reading of Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” within the discourse of critical theory or, as in my reading of *The Waste Land*, within English literature, depends completely on the boundaries of the set.

To be more explicit: I understand the set of “Tradition and the Individual Talent” to be critical discourse at the time of the essay’s composition (1918-9). Taken this way, the essay is a truth event for criticism, insofar as it uncovers a materially useful term.
(objective correlative) through a fidelity to a lost event (artistic surrender) and a critical process (the dialectic). Again this is not how Badiou would suggest his thought be utilized by literary scholars but I believe the concerns of modernity – particularly those of authority and position – justify my aligning of Eliot’s essay with Badiou’s program.

I treat *The Waste Land* in several ways and am able to do so thanks to the multifarious applicability of Badiou’s inaesthetics and the indefinable yet existent notion of a set. We may imagine English literature as a set, of which *The Waste Land* becomes the truth testified to by both Eliot and Pound. We may also imagine the poem which Eliot intended to write as a set which is then conditioned by the set of the poem which Pound intended, in effect replicating the process of dual conditioning I explain in-depth towards the end of chapter two. But most persuasively I take *The Waste Land* itself to be a set and thereby demonstrate the difference between the simulacrum of the conclusion Eliot desired and the truth of the conclusion Pound encouraged.

These readings neither hew closely to Badiou’s own demonstrations of his reading technique (as in his analysis of Beckett) nor to the practice of literary theory he encourages in the abstract (as in the *Handbook*). What authorizes my readings is my own understanding of the implications of Badiou’s set theory ontology, his ethics, and his pursuit of truth.

The first three chapters, then, do not provide a critical engagement with Badiou’s thought; due to the relative obscurity of his program I think it best to introduce the reader to what I believe to be the most pertinent elements of his system, namely set theory and its puncturing by the poetic statement. I am not an expert on Mallarmé, Hölderlin, Celan,
Pessoa, Beckett or any other of the authors Badiou deploys with regularity, and my treatment of these figures sticks closely to what I understand his positions on them to be, since certain names operate in Badiou’s writings with totemic significance. I am also aware of the at times glib nature of Badiou’s writing, including his backhanded treatment of major intellectual, historical and artistic figures and I can only hope such a strategic style has in no way influenced my own.

As Badiou writes in *Conditions*, “an anticipatory hypothesis obviously constitutes a forcing of the little-said” (126). There is no greater temptation in Badiou’s system than to insist on a conclusion that has not yet revealed itself. Yet to cede to this desire is disastrous, endangering the very legitimacy of the process of critique, a process which must be trusted to reveal its own conclusions. My aim with these readings is not to suggest that these texts have been exhausted but quite the opposite: that they, as great art tends to do, remain ever-fertile as the basis and grounds for a continuance of thought.
CHAPTER 1
AFTER THE POST-MODERN

1.1 Mathematics is Ontology

The very word “ontology” challenges tenets of post-modern thought, since for the term to be effective we must assume a stable and coherent framework within which questions can be posed and explored. Yet the notions of “stability” and “coherence” were the specters of the dangerous regimes of thought which post-modernism was built to overthrow. Those who survived the disastrous imposition of grand narratives from the bloody first half of the 20th century spent the second half of that century emphasizing the more menacing aspects of the false consciousness necessary to infuse stability into a “reality” which was demonstrably unstable. If the first half of the 20th century attempted to enact the change promised by the prophets of the 19th, the thinkers of the latter half of the 20th century bent themselves to answer who would, or even could, dare to make such promises and enact such changes.

In an attempt to pinpoint this “who” (and, at times, to assign blame), the identity and role of the subject becomes the central question for post-modern philosophy. A persistent re-visitation of the Cartesian model becomes de-rigueur, particularly in the case of Lacan, who wrestles often throughout the 1960s with the implications of the Cartesian subject as a self-identifying, thinking being, capable of rational action.

The work of Badiou’s two great mentors, Lacan and Louis Althusser, is exemplary of an age which sought to disrupt the notion of the human as a self-identical
agent which underlies change. The subject becomes, for Althusser, an identity assigned by ideology; the subject becomes for Lacan constituted by its desire. Such approaches inevitably require a more thorough explication of their particular framework than the subject constituted by it, and so Althusser places his emphasis on describing the nature of ideology, Lacan on the nature of desire, and meditations on these themes take up the bulk of their respective schools of thought. Yet such a process risks objectification of these themes, elevating them to the very type of grand narratives that post-modernism sought to expose as baseless, random and irrational. Any such total theory of existence is doomed to collapse in post-modern thought because it is bounded finally by the very parameters of the subject which has imagined it.

More recent thinkers such as Deleuze and Lyotard have de-centered even this critique, finally dispensing with such an antique notion of a static “subject” in favor of a much more dynamic model: a local, autonomous site of multiplicity functioning as a living intersection endowed with autonomy. With this conception, the human (for a rejuvenated humanistic theory is what is finally at stake with these Continental investigations) escapes any such destiny as ideology or family. Each human subject, finally, is a storehouse of wonders, containing the multitude. By the mid 1970’s Lacan himself not-quite-sheepishly admits that he does “not believe in the object…” and has no interest in what could be termed a “reality” outside of the subject (XXIII 10).

Such a position raises some interesting questions. If each bounded subject, for example, contains the multitude, we are left with no method to differentiate between subjects. For thinkers such as Foucault, the subject that grasps the working mechanisms
of power is in turn constituted by these very mechanisms (IT 4). Lacan attempts to break such solipsism by positioning the subject at the site of connection: the subject is that which connects signifiers, wringing sense from the multitude of facts (Fink 79). The problem of differentiation between acting subjects is then answered by Lacan’s decision to identify the subject through the content of its actions. The question of style, of savoir-faire, becomes key for the later Lacan. To follow the implications of this answer, however, once again begs the question of agency, the problem which lies at the very heart of post-modernism.

If, for Lacan, it is the Name of the Father, or even the objet a, which produces a coherent subject, we are then confronted with the question of how a subject could ever identify, much less alter, its engendering agent. The art of the analyst is to perhaps re-organize these fundamental processes of identification for the betterment of the analysand, and yet these notions of “betterment” are highly problematic. The analysand is assumed to be ignorant of her own nature and therefore incapable of either knowing herself or of effecting a change within herself. In a slightly more optimistic vein, late in his career with Seminar XXIII, Lacan suggests a process of self-authoring: those who are capable of remaking themselves do so in a process that affords them a position outside of the powers which initially constituted them.

Yet, as Feltham and Clemens have argued, all these maneuvers simply re-position the question of agency, bracketing it further from a “normal” course of human events: who, finally, are the few that are capable of authoring their own destiny? What mysterious power do these few possess that grants them agency and dooms those without
to some kind of sub-human, under-realized existence? This question, for post-modernism, remains unanswered (IT 4).

Post-modernism leaves us with either a completely relativistic view of subjects: that each subject is unique, independent and equally vital, or with an irrelevant view of the majority of subjects: that certain subjects are innately superior to others. The path out of this impasse concerning agency and identity is, curiously, easy to identify and difficult to enact. As Austin Quigley writes, we must look for “something larger that can establish and sustain social bonds without aspiring to universality or threatening to become intolerant, exclusionary or oppressive” (Quigley 12). We must, in other words, find “something larger” which can provide a common ground for an infinite number of unique subjects which does not execute this strategy through the exclusion of other unique subjects.

Taking his cue from Miller’s simple question regarding Lacan’s ontology, Badiou believes that if philosophy can re-arm itself with a clear definition of ontology, the post-modern impasse (merely an extension of the modern impasse) can finally be thought through and consequently broken. His fundamental insight, and the statement on which he hangs the bulk of his philosophy, is the assertion that mathematics is ontology. From this assertion, Badiou tasks philosophy with a functioning, intellectual pursuit of truth in the world.

What mathematics specifically enables Badiou to present that other languages fail to provide is the schematic of an infinite situation free from interfering values. The level of abstraction which is possible with mathematics allows for an examination of the
elements in a situation from a purely relational standpoint. The slippage of the signifier over the signified prevents any spoken language from being a more accurate vehicle than mathematics for the formalization of a situation. Mathematics, for instance, due to its ability to formalize infinity, enables us to avoid questions of gradations in quality (there is no “best” number in math). This helps to avoid the pitfall of a transcendental number – a transcendental position - from within mathematics itself. Also there is no gradation of a single number: each number is independent of another. The rules of mathematics are therefore applicable regardless of the identity of the numbers in question. Contingent values of elements in a situation can thereby be eliminated. Of utmost important is that mathematics provides what no other language can match: the complete absence of an object. Mathematics does not discuss anything other than itself; it is signifier without signified. A number is an inscription of Being and its infinite relations are a discourse thereof.

Badiou’s first major work, *Being and Event*, creates what amounts to a meta-ontology to translate mathematical work into more traditionally philosophical terms, and it is in these terms that Badiou so often writes: *presentation, representation, state of the situation, the count, the count-as-one, multiple multiplicity*. His method is notable: wary of the imposition of a grand narrative from within language, Badiou attacks the problems of post-modernism obliquely. His technique is one of abstraction, of reversal, of re-labeling, of appropriation, of deferral. To take the example of agency, Badiou tackles the old problem by turning it on its head.
Working backwards from his chief assertion that the nature of Being is best expressed in mathematical terms, Badiou approaches agency through a consideration of choice. As mathematics allows him to posit a Being which is multiply multiple, any presentation of infinite Being must by very dint of a presentation be limited – it must represent some elements and not represent others - meaning, essentially that each moment that something is said, there must be something left unsaid. Whomever, or whatever, makes the first decision as to what is said and unsaid thereby inaugurates the presentation itself (remember Miller’s question to Lacan). In order to inscribe Being – in order to found psychoanalysis, for example - there must then be an inscriber, and that inscriber is the subject. The subject is not that which may or may not act in a situation, the subject is only the subject of the situation itself. Agency, then, understood as the ability to make a decision, is the only thing that a subject is capable of showing (Saint Paul 53). This simple assertion disrupts the subject-obsession of post-modernism by positing that agency is not a latent power of all subjects, or even some subjects, but is the only power of the subject. A subject, finally, is that which shows agency.

The existence of an autonomous subject is, in essence, assumed, yet the conditions for the creation and existence of such a subject are what take on more scrutiny for Badiou here. In a strict refusal of transcendental agency – of questions pertaining to the existence of an overarching One – Badiou allows for no meta-force to select such acting subjects; there exists only a perpetual interaction of facts and their organization. The acting subject arises from random encounters: a phrase read in a book, a smile glimpsed on the subway, a call missed from a friend. An interaction of the mortal
desiring animal and the infinite series of encounters carry the potential to ignite the human into subjectivity, but only due to an already-present structural weakness within the situation. The seeds of agency are, consequently, more present in the situation than in the human which encounters it. Agency then does not reside finally within human beings, but with Being itself, and the subject is that which accesses it (IT 5).

The consequence of holding the position that agency rests with Being is the necessity to then propose a stable and coherent analysis of Being in the interest of explaining why some things occur and not others, yet a stable and coherent analysis of Being risks the very Hegelian troubles of the existence of an Absolute Knowledge that post-modernism so effectively counters.

Badiou solves this problem by positing a study of Being that is neither definitively stable nor coherent. His understanding of philosophy as it relates to Being is a discourse which is perpetually under siege from outside conditions whose very purpose is to undermine philosophy’s stability and coherence. Working from a Heideggerian understanding of the split between Being and knowledge, we may imagine that the attack of knowledge, which must emanate from Being, produces the only real object of study which philosophy can pursue: the truth.

1.2 The Truth and the Law

The pursuit of truth has proven to be a very unfashionable concept for Badiou to endorse. “Truth” has suffered mightily in intellectual circles for the past century since
the mass obedience to a greater “truth” seems to be consistently responsible for organized atrocities. Yet to abandon truth as a goal effectively destroys the possibility of achieving the common ground which can establish and sustain the social bonds that Quigley imagines. It is a clear concept of truth which offers a method to overcome the dilemma of relative position or totalitarian authority.

The abandonment of the pursuit of truth has also, in turn, rendered metaphysical investigations into society almost completely irrelevant, as it strips philosophy of any consistent method save that of rhetoric. This is one major reason that the greatest thinkers of post-modernism are, above all, great stylists. The thinking-in-writing of Lacan, Deleuze, or Derrida is genuinely un-replicable, their conclusions profoundly personal, their conscious acts of “self-authoring” enviable. But these projects, Badiou suggests (especially in his work on Deleuze), are closer to artistic endeavor than philosophy, and the danger of following these acrobatic leads lies in their lack of an underlying principle to anchor themselves other than isolated projects of self-discovery (Barker 122).

This anchor once was truth. If philosophy allows itself no such category toward which it can aim its endeavors, little wonder it spends so much time turning back upon itself to analyze its own temporal or aesthetic commodification, philosophy itself becoming “an object of circulation” (IT 36). The linguistic turn initiated by Wittgenstein, naturally, constitutes the most profound advancement of philosophy in the last hundred years; an advancement, Badiou notes, which was meant to end philosophy, not enrich it (IT 33).
The analytic school of philosophy which has developed in the wake of Wittgenstein (as well as other thinkers such as Carnap) has come to dominate the study and practice of philosophy in American and British universities. Its chief concern is the recognition and establishment of a rule of law which thereby allows for a collective agreement on meaning. Through a logical and grammatical analysis of utterances, analytic philosophy aims to discover the underlying rules which govern a situation in the interest of differentiating what can and cannot be said sensibly. Philosophy then, for the analytic school, essentially becomes a therapeutic exercise; one which cures us of illusions instituted by the potential meaninglessness of language.

But Badiou believes that the analytic school announces, effectively, the end of a traditional notion of philosophy (IT 34). If, as the analytic school seems to hold, philosophy as a discourse has always been confounded by its very mode of discourse – language – then it has always carried within it the seeds of its own demise. If the lack of precision in language is the great weakness for philosophical enquiry, it is for Badiou the source of its greatest strength, insofar as he includes a poetic aspect into his understanding of change.

Wittgenstein, for example, believed the best change philosophy could bring about was its own extinction: philosophy is, for him, a nightmare from which humanity must awake and, armed with the proper empirical tools, the analytic school promises that it is finally possible to cease to ask the meaningless questions philosophy endlessly poses. It is in this way that the analytic school sounds a note of triumph, as though in the 20th
century, philosophy was finally overcome thanks to the identification of meaning as present-but-dependent on the given situation (IT 34).

All well and good for philosophy to extract meaning from set situations, but Badiou suggests that if philosophy is to be truly relevant it must be able to think through - to understand - the forces from which these very situations arise, since such a situation can only be constituted by a priori principles (36). Philosophy must be able to understand the forces of truth which in turn allow meaning to exist. A philosophy that can only schematize a given situation based on its relational elements is effectively neutered of its ability to expound upon questions that interact with daily existence: questions of love, of ethics, of politics, of art. What of the principles which found the elements themselves?

Without an understanding of the founding principles of given situations, it becomes impossible to analyze change within the situations. There is little room in the situations of analytic philosophy for change; it struggles mightily to keep pace with the naturally frenetic play of language and, most importantly, the effect that play may initiate on the very situations in which it exists. Championing as it does a scientific discourse, analytic philosophy is helpless in front of art or love, of poetry or music; discourses whose currents often run counter to, or are unplumbable by, logical analysis.

Badiou seeks a deeper structure than that suggested by Wittgenstein. His aims are for a philosophy which can, as analytic philosophy does, schematize a static situation, and yet one which also can think the compatible possibility – the “compossibility,” Badiou writes – of several such situations at once (BE 4). Such a philosophy would be able to examine and confirm at once the series of truths which initiate such varying
situations, while exploring the meaning they offer. If for Wittgenstein, philosophy is the very situation - the tool which allows for the analysis of the language game - for Badiou these situations are more like *symptoms* of the larger existence of Being, and it is up to philosophy to understand Being through these symptoms.

Yet each situation itself is infinite, composed as it is of an incalculable multiplicity of elements; further, there exist an incalculable multiple of situations. An analysis of Being as Badiou imagines it, would have to be flexible enough to schematize multiple, and separate, infinities. Indeed one of the great draws of Badiou’s use of mathematics as ontology is that is allows for infinitely overlapping infinities. Yet Badiou makes no claims to Absolute Knowledge, insisting that ontology is incapable of grasping Being in total, then there can be no ultimately uniting principle: no cosmos, no immortal substance, no God. Ontology is “obliged to think” Being, but cannot grasp any totalizing conception of a “One” (BE 517).

Except by very dint of the enunciation of the situation – of its existence in a language of *any* sort – unity must at some level exist. Such a level could be understood as one of understanding, of classification, of symbolic processing of the inherently chaotic real of Being. As such it occurs on a secondary level, not in the presentation of Being itself, but a re-presentation thereof. Unity, for Badiou, is a necessary process: “necessary” insofar as enunciation is impossible without it; a “process” insofar as it is a refinement of the chaotic presentation (BE 521). Unity is not an illusion, here, but a framework, the edges of which are determinate and fixed, but not immobile.
Unity is achieved through a process of symbolization Badiou terms “the count.” The unity of a situation is an effect of the count, and this notion of effect is key, since elements of one situation can also belong to another situation (BE 504). From the level of pure Being, unity is imaginary; it is an effect of the act of symbolization which provides the presentation. Unity is a fact, however, of the secondary level of the representation. It is in this way that Badiou avoids the mutually exclusive identities of situations: a lover’s smile, for example, could be a crucial element in a conversation or in a political revolution.

Badiou provides no agent for this counting; there is no History, Dialectic, or Discourse. Only within mathematical ontology does Badiou allow for a distinction between the situation and the process that structures it (BE 522). The cutting blade of the count, the distinguishing engine that determines what elements of the infinite number are relevant to the unity of a situation, runs forever a step ahead of the static understanding of ontology; its existence is a founding formula, confirmed by the very unity we perceive after the fact.

The count is best understood from within examples; its effects - its wake which is the situation - is what can be discerned. If we first assert, for example, that “modern poetry is impersonal,” and hope to locate the cutting blade of the count, we must first examine precisely what we mean by “modern,” “poetry” and “impersonal,” as each of these words must be separated from others to establish their meaning. After we have clarified, with other principles - other counts - what we chose to mean by each word, only then can we begin to examine the effect of the verb - the “is” - since such a present-tense
statement reverberates throughout the elements of a situation of “poetry.” If, after an analysis of the poetry deemed “modern,” the statement demonstrates itself to be accurate (and therefore “true”) facts which are ancillary to it will be reshuffled, while newly emerging facts will be influenced by the truth of the statement.

Such an analysis requires two models of Being: a static model of Being, in which such words as “impersonal” and “modern” can be determined, as well as a dynamic model, where the “is” of such a statement can be allowed to re-align what we have already known (IT 6). It is the count which provides the static model as the presented multiplicity, the unified state. The dynamic model of Being, on the other hand, always suggests more than what is presented; Being could be crudely understood as all poems from which the count must then separate those which are “modern” and those which are “impersonal” and only then determine if the selected poems are both “modern” and “impersonal,” and in what ways they are, or are not. In this way the movement of the count is inevitable, making the situation, even at its most stable, capable of subtle fluctuations. The “unity” is never totally unified; it is forever shifting at its edges and reforming, never finished and never complete.

The count then provides both the terms of the situation as well as the engine of its potential change. If the statement “modern poetry is impersonal” can be demonstrated as true, the present understanding of what the terms refer to will be altered, as will be the understanding of poetry that is not considered modern. This is the real mark of a truth: its ability to dramatically affect, and subsequently change, a field wider than its immediate associations. The truth makes change; it is manifested in the count, which is manifested
in the altering of the situation. When that which has been known is no longer accepted, it is the result of the effect of truth. The truth “bores a hole in knowledge” (BE 525).

To return to a more post-modern understanding of Badiou’s ontology: the count can be understood as a symbolic process of encoding, enacted upon an un-totalizable real. But in contrast to Lacan’s (and more significantly Zizek’s) interpretation of the Real, Badiou disregards the more subjective (and perhaps corporeal) reactions of horror and jouissance from contact with such a limit. Badiou’s philosophy, at many points, can be understood as a formalization of Lacan’s formalization of Freud. As Lacan became only more enamored with abstract models as his seminars progressed (from algebra to knot-theory), Badiou takes such generic formalization to the bedrock of mathematics, thereby freeing it from the particularities of time, place, identity and quality.

If ontology is to be understood as the discourse on Being, and if Being is to be understood as the inconsistent multiplicity, we can therefore understand mathematics as the discourse of inconsistent multiplicity, and it is in set theory that we are best able to locate a system for the manipulation of various infinities.
2.1 The Infinite Subject

Despite the fact that Badiou is an accomplished mathematician, he does not attempt to explicitly blend mathematics into philosophy until relatively late in his career with *Being and Event*, where he asserts that mathematics is ontology (BE 4). While Badiou believes mathematics as practiced in set theory to be ontology, he does not believe it to be philosophy; mathematics in general - and set theory in particular - is a condition and a fundamental support for philosophy.

What is of principle interest to me is the interlocking relationship Badiou sees between number and word, between poetry and mathematics, and in this relationship philosophy functions as the mediator and the very point of their intersection. The assertion of poetic language, Badiou writes, is in turn conditioned by the genericity of number and the discursive movement of logic, just as the logic of mathematics is broken and freed by the assertion of poetics (HA 19). Philosophy, then, is the very process of this conditioning, and the nature of this process hinges on what precisely Badiou imagines mathematics to bring to an analysis of the word. While the next chapter will deal explicitly with his aesthetics, I would like to examine here the necessity for and the implications of Badiou’s engagement with mathematics, which marks, I believe, the most original and striking aspect of his thought. Also, it is within an analysis of Badiou’s engagement with mathematics itself that we may begin to grasp, in the most concrete
manner possible, the nature of his understanding of a subjectivity that is based in the infinite rather than the finite and, by extension, the basis for a thinking that moves beyond traditionally modern (and by extension post-modern) concerns of finitude.

The stakes of Badiou’s mathematical engagement with the concept of infinity for the overcoming of modernist thought could hardly be higher. If modernism can be represented as “correlative thought,” as Meillassou has recently suggested, then it is a correlative thought that is typified by its tragically bounded relation to its own sense of reality (AF 28). The relational aspect of this thought, which Meillassou writes has come down to us from Kant, asserts that the subject and the object are only such due to the relation they occasion between them; that the subject exists only insofar as it perceives the objects of its thought (AF 6). The “tragedy” of such a relational reality is perhaps first and best enunciated by Nietzsche but is also certainly endorsed by thinkers such as Lacan in his consideration of Antigone in Seminar VII. Tragedy, for these modern thinkers, is the most suitable aesthetic approach to a transcendental notion of truth because it enables the bounded subject – a subject bounded by the physical necessities of its objective world – to engage with and merge into its fully realized desire at the point at which death opens into the infinite Void. Tragic heroes are then understood to be the most fully realized subjects, insofar as they abandon themselves to their constitutive desire regardless of, and as a testament to, physical constraints; as Critchley puts it, they “heroically bear the truth of their finitude in an act of affirmation which allows them to achieve authenticity (ID 75).”
Such tragic finitude can be understood as a hallmark of modernist stasis and indecision; the modern subject, then, exists in a “transparent cage,” able, thanks to language, to bear witness to a reality in which the subject may never fully participate due to the very inappropriateness of language to convey that reality (AF 7). It is this conception of finitude, in its preoccupation with boundaries and bounded-ness, which provides the base for the celebration of difference which has typified post-modern thought. If the bounded subject must always be identified by a single identity, goes this line of reasoning, then each identity should not be mourned for what it is not, but saluted for what it is – for what makes it, in other words, different.

But as Badiou’s *Ethics* argues, the post-modern preoccupation with identity and the “culturism” from which it springs amount to little more than a “tourist fascination” with difference (E 26). Differences are banal in their plentitude, with as many differences between two members of the same “race” as with two members of different countries. But further, Badiou asks: are there not differences even within the individual human itself? Is this not the meaning, he asks, of Rimbaud’s famous declaration “I am another”? For Badiou, the cohesion of a stable, and thereby bounded, identity is an imaginary construction, evidenced by ability of the emergence “a truth,” in whatever sphere, to completely realign that identity (27). But again, to reject a post-modern celebration of difference is to re-embrace a tragic modern finitude, a process we can identify in more recent considerations of the Freudian death-drive in Zizek and others.

The two horns of the modern dilemma – the endless identification of a different position from which to speak identity, and the escape of this circle through the horrifying
promise of a merge into an ecstatic death-beyond – can then be understood to sprout from
the conception of the subject as a bounded, finite being. And why not? Death is a
constant for the human, and it is with the marker of death that the line of every human
life ends. But throughout his *Ethics* Badiou makes clear a difference between the human
animal and the subject of truth.

Badiou’s subject is not a “psychological subject” (a desiring animal), not a
Cartesian reflexive subject or a Kantian transcendental subject. The Badio uan subject is
simply “the one who bears a process of truth,” in which case the truth “induces” the
subject. The subject of politics is a Party, not a protestor. The subject of art is a work,
not an artist (E 43).

In terms of tragic finitude, Badiou asserts that the subject is identifiable as the
finite instance of an infinite truth (BE 523). This statement fails to cohere, however,
unless Badiou can explain his conception of the infinite in reference to how a subject can
access the infinite and still retain its unique subjectivity. To explain this, in turn, requires
a firm conception of an infinite that is not a Beyond or a death or an unknowable Void,
forever non-transversible by thought. It is with these concepts in mind that Badiou’s
engagement with mathematics begins to pay, for us, its largest dividends. What set
theory specifically allows, Badiou believes, is the construction of a model of Being that is
both transversible and infinite.

If we begin, as Hallward does, with Badiou’s preference for Plato over Aristotle,
we may trace a brief line through the history of philosophy in regards to the
mathematically infinite, coming to rest with what precisely Badiou gains from his
invocation of set theory as a foundational support of his philosophy, particularly how he is able to surpass a modern conception of tragic finitude by founding his subject in a transversible infinite.

Being, for Badiou, is understood as “not objectivity, nor the given, but rather the gift, the gesture of opening up which unfolds its own limit as that in which it resides without limitation.” It takes part, Badiou writes, in both what is observable from within a given situation, and that given situation’s excess. Both the situation, “the consistent, presented multiplicity,” and the Void are understood as located in Being (BE 522). Often using the term “multiple multiplicity” to address aspects of Being in the interest of disrupting any objectifiable handle for the concept, Badiou imagines Being as what an imaginarily consistent situation was before the presentation of it; the banal inconsistent multiplicity from which the presentation is culled (IT 9).

There remain in Badiou’s thought some thorny issues regarding use of mathematics to address this conception of Being, issues regarding the status of mathematics as logical or scientific or neither. Badiou follows a Cantorian notion of mathematics which liberates mathematics from a necessary correspondence with any object; a correspondence which he often attributes to an understanding of mathematics which rose with Galileo and remains contested by mathematicians (IT 136). Cantor, and later Gödel and Cohen, disrupt, for Badiou, this correspondence between physical reality and mathematics, leading Badiou to surmise that if mathematics is capable of surpassing the observable physical reality of an imaginarily cohesive situation, then in these
moments of surpassing it must be grasping a previously incoherent segment of Being, and number continues to move, as it were, through the infinite multiples outside of the situation - in that situation’s Void. It is principally able to do this, Badiou writes in *Number and Numbers*, because of the total abstraction of Number. Number is as inscription of Being (we may naturally hear echoes here of a Platonic ideal) and as mathematics is able to move though a coherent situation and out past its imaginarily consistent boundaries, yet itself remain coherent in its discourse, Badiou believes that mathematics is then ultimately free from the objective relationship that occurs within a given situation.

Based on the ability of mathematics to scientifically schematize observable physical reality, what can be presented as a situation is most concisely done so mathematically; further, based on the ability of mathematics to remain a coherent discourse outside of observable physical reality, Badiou believes that mathematics is the ideal method with which to approach the concept of a situation’s infinite Void which acts as its “suture to Being” (B526). As mathematics then addresses a situation and its Void, the ideal study of Being is a mathematical one.

In *Being and Event*, Badiou condenses Aristotle’s rejection of the Void into three terms based on a Void’s tendency towards “in-difference,” “in-finite” and “un-measure” (incommensurability) (73). All three terms are tied to the supposition that the Void excludes movement (non-transversible) and as movement is the essence of Nature, a Void cannot exist in nature. Badiou agrees with the first two of these objections. The
Void is indifferent and infinite, but: the infinite, as proven by Cantor, is not a single collection and therefore free from a process of counting; in other words it is not non-transversible. Also, Aristotle was incapable, in Badiou’s estimation, to think of an “empty place,” or a place without the movement of Nature (77). What this means is that Aristotle, who was naturally without Cantor’s insights, could not think of Nature as a single particular situation and as such founded upon that which it is not – the Void. The proof of the Void here is that it exists as the “unpresentable point of being of any presentation.” Badiou parts with Aristotle decisively here, writing “it is necessary to think, under the name of the void, the out-side place of which any place…maintains itself with respect to its being” (77).

The ultimate drawback of Aristotle for Badiou, Hallward points out, lies in Aristotle’s resistance to Number as the most concise method of presentation. It seems as though Badiou believes that Aristotle cannot, or will not, think through the repercussions of Number. If Aristotle, in his ontology, can be understood as concerned primarily with the substance of Things and plumbing the nature of the Thing with logic, Badiou believes a basic disservice to the role of philosophy to be evident in such a position (ST 53). What Badiou identifies here particularly is the retroactive nature of Aristotle’s logic based on the assumption that such Things are properly existent; meaning that a philosophy of Things bases analysis on present conditions, bounded by the moment, and then subjects philosophy to the operations of an imaginary situation founded in power. The danger to philosophy exists in the potential in such a case for it to be used as an excuse for the predominant mode of a given situation; an apologist for power (ST 53).
Plato, on the other hand, advocates Number as the primary subject of philosophical study, thereby elevating the “scientific materiality of the signifier” (53). What this means is that “substance,” “Thing,” and “object” are all empty categories, possessing no intrinsic qualities. Only the Number, as simple signifier, is a suitable given for analysis. This insight follows into the more modern era through Descartes’s separation of representation from an actual universe and finds echoes, (as does much Descartes), in Lacan’s insistence that “we can only think of language as a network…over the entirety of the real (I 262).” Hallward aligns Badiou and Lacan explicitly, writing that “truth” can be identified as that which separates thought from object, further quoting Seminar II to make the point that progress is identifiable by the removal of the Thing and its replacement by number (53). Of greatest importance, then, is Number; further, as Number is not an object and thereby resists objectification, it is mathematics that best presents any collection (NN 209).

Badiou asserts that Number is a form of Being principally due to is its absolute lack of an object. Such a statement is made possible by the work of Gödel and Cohen, who in Badiou’s estimation decisively overturned the belief that mathematics corresponded to an objective reality. As Paul Cohen’s engagement with the Continuum Hypothesis (which we will elaborate on shortly) enables Badiou to posit that mathematics is a discourse on nothing (that there is no clear anchor between the operations of mathematics and any observable world), mathematics is then able to avoid the “correlationism” inherent in the vicissitudes of the subject-object relation and the Kantian relational objections to any treatment of a purified signifier. Hallward notes that this is
the aim and illustration of Lacan’s statement: “the signifier doesn’t just provide…a receptacle for meaning, it polarizes it, structures it, and brings it into existence” (III 260).

There should be a difference maintained here, however, between a mathematical discourse and, for example, a poetic one. The difference lies, as Hallward suggests, in Badiou’s deprivation of an ultimate or over-arching justification for mathematics, while in poetry we may find “the pretension to coordinate…judgments directly with an intuition of the profound nature of Being” (59). Mathematics, on the other hand, neither has nor claims to have an understanding of Being; it has no understanding. While poetry, through its assertion of Presence - that behind all multiple presentation lies a One - mathematics is forbidden some such collective Presence. Badiou bases this restriction on a history of set theory’s own paradoxes, such as the inability to nominate a set of sets (61).

To engage directly with the nature of a mathematical infinite we must first understand that while Plato, for example, may offer the Good as an example of a sublime, transcendent infinite towards which the subject may extend, Badiou will assert that the subject is subtractively infinite, meaning that there is no “intuition” of an infinity beyond our present reality. The infinite is, instead, part of everything a subject does, since it may do so without reference to an object. A subject may act (that is, “think”) in an infinite dimension due to the ability of mathematics to enumerate infinite sets and, if we can think mathematically, we can then think infinitely (67).

Principle to the enormous impact on philosophy Badiou attributes to set theory is the ability of set theory to think the possibility of infinite collections (67). Hallward
points to Descartes as the exemplification of the philosophical position on infinity from Zeno to Cantor: “since we are finite,” according to Descartes, “it would be absurd for us to determine anything concerning the infinite, for this would be to attempt to limit it” (ST 67). In the face of this intellectual disregard for the infinite as unthinkable due to its non-transversible nature, Georg Cantor was able to propose, with his theory of sets, what Bertrand Russell called “an exact science of the infinite” (68).

After Cantor, infinity could no longer could be understood as a single Thing or an interminable progression of (1,2,3…n); Cantor was able to demonstrate the existence of different infinities, that is, “different sizes of infinity” (68). For example, while the collection, or set, of all natural numbers is itself infinite, it is demonstrably different from the set of “real” numbers, which contain all natural numbers, fractions and additionally include irrational and transcendental numbers (68). Cantor proves this with his now-famous Diagonal Proof, which demonstrates that there are infinite sets (in particular the set of reals), which cannot be put in a one-to-one correspondence with the infinite set of denumerable (natural and fractional) numbers. There are a series of sets, then, of different sizes, or “cardinalities.”

The Diagonal Proof imagines a number line from 1 to 0 and suggests that if we were to generate an endless list of points on that line (.111111, .267354, .8745632…) it would seem intuitive that we would eventually name every point on the line; yet Cantor was able to show with simple arithmetic that this is not the case. Any such series of numbers listed vertically provide, in the diagonal axis of that list, a number which will
appear nowhere on such an infinite list (ST 331). The numbers resulting from the Diagonal Proof provided clear evidence of a set of real numbers, a set Cantor named “c.”

Introducing a symbolic system for these varying infinities, signifying each with the Hebrew aleph (א) Cantor was then able to subject the alephs to consistent mathematical processes, most importantly for us the powerset axiom, which allows for a new set to consist of the number of combinations possible from an existing set. We can understand the axiom of the powerset in relation to Cantor’s infinite sets as the tipping point of the belief of mathematical correlation to observable reality.

Troubling about this powerset axiom in regards to an infinite set is that what Cantor was able to show theoretically had no immediately observable correlation in the natural world. This was distressing to above all Cantor himself, who hoped to rein in the theological implications of a chaotic universe of infinite progression with an ordered presentation of sets (Dauben 295). Just because there was no obvious correspondence between the powerset and what could be observed did not, for Cantor, demand that the powerset was an illogical invention. Cantor set out to prove that the set of real numbers and the powerset of denumerables are of an identical size; such a proof was key because the real numbers are essential in calculations of motion and continuous variation, and what is at stake here is relationship between the theoretical mathematics which allows the powerset, and observable phenomena in the physical world which can be represented with real numbers (69).

His proposal of the Continuum Hypothesis (CH) sought to rectify the multiplication of the philosophical problems associated with infinite progression (for
what does the introduction of \( \aleph \) do other than add another symbol to a system which already unwinds into the infinite) and the Continuum Hypothesis hinged on the question of “cardinality.”

Two sets are said to have the same cardinality if a one-to-one correspondence exists between their elements. The set \([1,2,3]\) then has the same cardinality as \([a,b,c]\). Cantor began to concern himself with the question of cardinality between the set of real numbers, \(C\), already proven to be larger than the set of denumerables, and a hypothetical powerset with exactly twice the amount of integers as the set of denumerables. If he could demonstrate that they had the same cardinality, then the processes of the mathematics which allow the powerset could then be considered analogous to existing observable conditions.

Successful in his proof that the reals and the powerset of the denumberables had the same cardinality, Cantor then set out to prove that all the powersets that could be generated could be matched to a corresponding non-powerset due to their equal cardinality. If, however, an infinite set existed that was larger than the denumerables but smaller than the reals, it would have a cardinality independent of any other set, throwing the entire concise order that Cantor hoped for, and intuitively accepted, into doubt. His Continuum Hypothesis therefore stated that such a set, one larger than the denumerables but smaller than the reals, did not exist.

If every infinite set has a corresponding powerset of equal cardinality, then every set rests with a corresponding pair, thereby locating every set as one of a pair. Such a result would suggest that mathematics does not, then, lose its coherence in the face of
infinity, unwinding into an indefinable chaos virtually identical to the age-old philosophical concept of infinity as a great Beyond intuited but unreachable by thought. Cantor hoped to prove that mathematics could not only grasp and manipulate infinity, but that these infinite infinities were well-ordered.

The implication of a well-ordered mathematical universe was, for Cantor, the presence of a higher concept of order than a mathematical one; a uniting Presence behind the multiplicity of Number; a One (Dauben 120). Such a universe would then be analogous to and representative of the physical universe, ordered by a God that does not “play dice.” CH, unproven by Cantor in his lifetime, came to represent a great deal more than a mathematical question; the existence of CH, for many mathematicians, philosophers and scientists, pointed to an ultimate – a higher – order than Number. If CH were true, Number then could be understood to be a precise link to physical continuity. If CH were untrue, however, there would exist mathematical processes – such as the powerset – which could find no relation to physical reality; further, there would exist sets which could be assigned no clear place or position in an order that includes them (ST 71).

In 1940, Kurt Gödel demonstrated (in work relatively unassociated with his more famous Incompleteness Theorem) that CH did in fact hold true, but in 1963 Paul Cohen took an ingenious path through the axioms of set theory to create his model MG; a model which effectively put the entire question of the Continuum Hypothesis in such a broad scope that it has currently become an irrelevant - that is, “undecideable” - question for Badiou; irrelevant insofar as the philosophical possibilities CH affords far outweigh any direct connection to its mathematical existence. (BE 504)
Cohen was able to demonstrate that while Gödel was able to prove the existence of CH from within set theory, Gödel’s proof was merely a proposition, a model, built in the midst of a larger, as-yet-undefined space. Cohen did this by constructing yet another coherent model, MG, in which CH did not hold true. What Cohen’s work immediately implies is either the accepted model of set theory is inconsistent or that set theory in particular, and by extension mathematics in general, is not necessarily anchored in an objective reality. Badiou, along with the majority of theoretical mathematicians, assume the latter to be the case (ST 73). Today it is understood that there is an enormous discrepancy, in other words, between what Badiou would understand as the multiplicity of Being and what mathematics is able to represent or measure. Following Hallward, we can imagine the real of mathematics to be this very point of indeterminacy, and the indeterminate point of mathematics itself - the real into which it cannot go - is the belief in its own efficacy (69-70).

After Gödel and Cohen we may then say that when faced with the infinite multiplicity of Being in which mathematics exists “we must tolerate the almost completely arbitrary situation of a choice,” a choice as to whether, for example, CH exists or not. Badiou then proclaims that the numerical basis of mathematics as a unit of measure, “quantity, this paradigm of objectivity, leads to pure subjectivity” (70). In other words, the undecideable nature of CH is, for Badiou, the very point of entry into a fruitful discussion of subjectivity. At the position of the opening of the infinite multiplicity of Being – the limit point of mathematics - does Badiou then locate the necessity of a
decision, executed by a subject; from the infinite and pre-ontological multiplicity then, arises the situation as decided by the subject.

This is, as Hallward notes, a claim to end the “the Romantic…investment in finitude. In the wake of Cantor’s invention, it is the finite that must be defined as a derivative limitation of the infinite” (71). The finite, then, rests (and always has rested) on the choice of a subject; a choice, strangely enough, made possible through the subject’s foundation in the infinite. Finitude, “is not the natural attribute of being, but a secondary restriction that unusual circumstances sometimes force upon being” (71). If the subject is understood as that which forces a decision, then questions of mortal limits, of time, identity or even the limit of death, become moot. The implications of this position for the concept of the subject are quite startling, and to fully grasp the nature of the Badiouan subject is, as mentioned earlier, to completely separate the notion of subjectivity from individuality.

I would like to return for a moment to Cohen’s work with the Continuum Hypothesis, because in *Set Theory and the Continuum Hypothesis* he identifies a technique crucial to Badiou’s overall program: namely, how rules already instituted into a situation are changed through a traversal of that situation. Cohen’s technique of “forcing” implies that while the founding decision of a situation may initially define that situation, the process of encoding that situation may fundamentally alter its overall definition in the language of that situation (BE 508).
While we have to this point considered the institution of stable sets as situations, to limit ourselves to this would be to ignore the obvious fluctuations of situations and make the mistake of more analytic philosophical models which fail to present dynamic models of Being. Badiou is preeminently concerned with a philosophical understanding of change, and a dynamic model of Being is then necessary for a more comprehensive and relevant ontology; an ontology which can take into consideration not only how things are, but how they got to be this way and further, what they could someday become (IT 9).

A presentation of Being cannot necessarily alter its own makeup. Change arises from the outside of the presentation, from the Void itself. It is at the limits of the presentation, where the boundaries are never completely firm and where elements may cross the arbitrary borders of the founding principle of the situation from that-which-is to that-which-is-not, that change is forced onto the situation through a process that Badiou terms “the count” in reference to the necessarily imaginary unity, or One-ness, of a presented situation: the count-as-one (BE 504). Cohen refers to the given “language” of a set, and the encounter of that known language with elements of another set about which almost nothing is known lead to what Badiou terms the “count”; specifically, as each element is either counted or not as belonging to a situation, certain elements force a decision as to whether the element is to be counted as a member of the set, and it is in this encounter that the set-as-situation itself can be altered.

Since the presentation of a Void is impossible, Cohen was able, through a re-interpretation of the axioms of set theory (specifically the axiom of extension in combination with a rejection of the necessity of constructible sets), to posit the existence
of a subset “G” about which nothing could be known (ST 342). Cohen then merges G with a larger set “M” about which everything is already known, to form the model MG. But in order to know what MG contains, and thereby know what MG is, G must have been traversed by a count of some sort. Cohen states that the language already present in M has then forced the unknown contents of G, positing that a known language has codified as-yet-unknown elements (ST 344).

Assuming that there is even one element in G which will satisfy the already-present language of M, Cohen encodes G based on the properties of M (Cohen 120). This allows Cohen to move from the constructible and the nameable of M into the non-constructible and un-nameable of G. This technique of using a language from a known set to traverse the elements of an unknown set is what Cohen calls “forcing” and it allows Cohen to move from what Badiou understands to be the presented situation into the multiplicity of Being which surrounds it as its Void.

But what is most exceptional in Cohen’s model is that in the process of forcing G to conform to the language of M, the language of M may change through its inclusion and exclusion of elements from G. The language of the resulting model MG can then be different from the original language of M (ST 346). To take a simplistic example, if M is a situation of what is to be understood as an “apple,” then the count of this situation - its language – operates based on a list of numerous principles which define “apple.” Assuming one of these principles states that “apples are 9 ounces or lighter,” we could imagine the count confronting, in G, an element which conforms to every principle definition of “apple” save its 10 ounce weight. In such an instance, a decision is forced
as to whether the count should be altered to include it as a member of the “apple” situation. Such a decision is allowed by the axioms of set theory (specifically the axiom of choice) and the repercussions of such a choice effectively alter the count to include the element, in effect changing the principle from “apples are 9 ounces or lighter” to “apples are 10 ounces or lighter.” This change in the definition of the situation of “apple” was initiated by a single new element – a 10 ounce apple – and such an element can only be encountered at the limits of the “apples are 9 ounces or lighter” situation, because while this heavier apple fits all other definitions of apple its weight initially classifies it as “not apple” until it is directly encountered by the count, thereby forcing a decision. This element then straddles the boundaries of the situation, and its inclusion into the situation affects the way all other elements in the situation, previously categorized, are retroactively categorized and thereby understood. Furthermore, the boundaries of the situation have been changed by this inclusion, and the count must then encounter new elements at the new boundary which continue to test its principles.

Cohen’s MG model provides Badiou with a mathematical foundation for a dynamic model of Being in which change can be schematized and understood. “Understanding” being the key, because Badiou insists that for philosophy to serve a purpose it must bring mere intuition into demonstrable understanding lest we fall back into what he deems the sophistry of Romantic finitude. What mathematics brings to this understanding, specifically, is a strong grasp of the infinite and an ability to manipulate it with replicable processes, thus enabling Badiou to position the subject not as a tragically
finite being. Such a subject has been understood by much of 20th century philosophy to be first pathetic in its indecision, then joyous in its enunciation of unique identity and finally suicidal in its uncompromising embrace of its governing desire. To suggest that the subject is not finite but infinite is one thing, to demonstrate how this could be the case with mathematics is quite another, and it demands a translation of more traditional philosophical notions of Being, Void and situation into mathematical set theory, and this translation takes up the bulk of Being and Event.

That Badiou is the first philosopher to suggest that mathematics in general and set theory in particular is ontology itself is, I believe, due in large part to his familiarity with the theory in conjunction with his belief in a Heideggerian conception of Being that must take into account an untotallizable Void.

Set theory allows for the establishment of multiple orders of infinity while at the same time acknowledging the limit of such a process and this fits neatly with a notion of ontology such as Badiou understands it to be. But most intriguing, and most relevant, about Badiou’s utilization of set theory is Cohen’s technique of forcing, which demonstrates not only how a known language is able not only to traverse a field of unknown elements, but how that very act of traversal will change the nature of the language itself. This technique supplies Badiou with a mechanism for change, a crucial piece of the ontological puzzle of Being. A decision is forced by the necessary encounter of that which is with that which is not.

And what makes the decision? This kind of question hinges once more on subjective autonomy, and the answer, I believe, is that such a decision arises from the
schematization of another situation. It is philosophy proper which allows the consideration of two situations simultaneously, where the result of one can impact the process of another, yet I would go further to suggest that the decision of “what is to be done” is ultimately a poetic process of the enunciation of Presence, which is then critiqued – perhaps better, assaulted – by the mathematic process. In the assumptions, for example, of Cohen’s model - that $G$ will have one element similar to $M$; that $MG$ exists - I detect the distinct influence of what Badiou calls a poetic mode of thinking, one which utilizes the power of grammar to generate metaphoric statements without any other support. And so: “$MG$ exists.”

Yet this answer still fails to account for the drive to make such a statement. The space beyond this constitutes the occurrence of the event.

2.2 The Enquiry for a Perfect Weakness

An ontology based on set-theory enables Badiou to test for a truth which either structures a situation or threatens to re-structure the situation. To risk a return to apples: if I were to assert, for example, “apples are not fruits” Badiou’s ontology would ostensibly enable me to expose this statement as false through a formalization of the relationship between the given terms. And yet, if a new fact, a new piece of information, was discovered which informed the understanding of these terms in a way that supported the statement, formalization would compare this information to previous findings and expose the burgeoning contradiction. Ontology, the mathematical work of the Number,
would itself bring no new facts to the discussion; it could however, discover them outside the established situation. Due to its ability to work outside of the parameters of a situation, set theory ontology would be able to utilize all present information without bias in the interest of either proving or disproving the initial statement.

All situations are not, however, equal. Their structures differ depending on the elements which compose it.\(^2\) Ontology, then, begins to uncover a truth by classifying the various possible structures of a situation. The presentation, or structure, can be classified in three ways based on the different types of multiple which compose them. The three possible types of multiple are: normal, which are presented in the situation and represented in the state; excrescent, which are represented in the state but are not present in the situation; and singular, which are presented in the situation but not represented in the state (IT 18).

In a “natural” structure there are no singular multiples. This allows all known elements to connect to and affect one another, as though a karmic wheel united all possible action. A “neutral” structure contains a mix of all three multiples, while a “historical structure” contains at least one “event-site,” (a sub-type of the singular multiple).

An event-site is present when the definition of what a multiple includes necessitates the active exclusion of some part of that multiple. This exclusion differs from the basic process of the count in which some elements are included and others are

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\(^2\) It should be noted that Badiou’s preferred term for “element” is “multiple” due to his desire to avoid any totalizing objectivity that the singular term “element” suggests.
not; an event-site is present when the very founding of the structure is based upon the act of dispossession, even denial, of elements which in other senses constitute it (BE 507).

While so many of Badiou’s examples lean on European history to illustrate this process, Daniel O’Hara offers a particularly American example; one which moves quickly to the peculiar core of the American identity as founded in the enslavement of Africans. To twist O’Hara’s example slightly, slavery facilitated the rapid growth of wealth in early America, yet slaves were not recognized politically as American (40). Slaves were recognized (and certainly unrecognized) in other ways – as human, as inhabitants of America, as Christian and so forth - but the political position of “American” is necessarily founded upon the active exclusion of Africans; “founded” because, as Robert Fogel and others have argued, America would lack the financial means to declare itself independence without the work provided by African slaves.

Schematically speaking, a multiple (African slave laborers) which is presented but not represented is rare enough, but in this case we have such a multiple upon which the situation is founded. That a multiple must be both present and not, exposed the political situation of “American” to the consequences of an event-site. And yet the presence of an event-site is not a guarantee of change.

What specific event, we could ask, transformed African slaves into political Americans? Was it John Brown? The Emancipation Proclamation? Was it the Civil War, or Rosa Parks, or was it, as Chris Matthews often suggested in the course of the 2008 election, Barack Obama himself?
What can be said for certain about the event is that it occurs in a way unformalizable by the situation. In the political situation of “American,” an infinite number of acts are perpetrated by a practically infinite number of actors. But whichever singular act enacts the necessary change is one which takes advantage of an already-present situational instability, what Badiou refers to as a “perfect weakness” (IT 140).

It is important to keep in mind that situations are not so fragile as to be destroyed by an instability. Even the paradox of slavery could not destroy the political situation of “American.” The consequences of slavery forced a redefinition of “American.” The mere presence of illogic does not cause the situation to collapse; situations, particularly large ones, national ones, economic ones, are remarkably flexible.

Certainly this kind of analysis is useful in hindsight, but Badiou hopes to task philosophy with providing more than historical analysis. How can we know, for example, when we will encounter an unstable situation? How will we know when something presented is not represented? The answer is that we can never objectively know. We can never prove a truth from inside a situation; it is “indiscernible” and “does not fall under any determinant of the encyclopedia” of the knowledge of the situation (BE 525). We must ourselves move outside a situation in order to locate the truth to which we will direct our action, and yet conversely it is an event which compels us to do so.

It is in this way that Badiou’s ontology is most strikingly different from those of the analytic philosophers: its preeminent concern with change (Feltham 86). Mathematics, due to its inability to define itself, implicates the answer to this problem without providing it. It is, for Badiou, poetic language which enables us to reach beyond
the known and into the unknown. Such language is unique – and furthermore defined as such to my mind - in that it allows for an almost unfettered presence of the excrescent multiple. With poetic language, things which are not presented can be represented. We can grammatically speak (to follow the example of Nassim Taleb’s recent book) about a “black swan” prior to any physical proof that such a thing could exist. This is both the weakness and the strength of language, enabling us to speak of things which are not.

This is not to say that everything nameable, suddenly is. What the excrescent multiple does do is allow us to speak of a model which might exist. To return to the above example of American slavery, the political reality of being an American today is both similar and dissimilar to the political reality of “American” in 1850. The first model established by the abolitionist movement in which the African slave would become the political American was both true and false. Just as in Cohen’s model MG, the interaction of the known and the unknown, pushed forward by the will of an agent, leads to a twin conditioning of each position - of each model - until a new model is reached.

This agent is, finally, the ethically driven subject. It is the subject which nominates the model based on an event; it is the subject which imagines, speaks and finally believes what reality could be. After the nomination of such a model, the ethical course of action for such a subject is to follow through on this sense of the possible (E 43). The subject must, as Badiou loves to put it, bet, that the change it imagines will come to pass. It is a bet that may or may not prove out, but without the courage to follow through on it, there will be no change (HA 48).
It is this particular sensibility that allows the subject to form a new reality from language that Badiou identifies as poetic. Philosophy has, Badiou points out, always used poetic devices when it has reached its own unpresentable core, at which point it then requires the tools of literature for its presentation (IT 79). All presentation, in essence, is a constructive argument based on the effective singularity of a truth; all arguments, Badiou is suggesting, even those of arch post-moderns such as Derrida or Lyotard, boil down to a point, acknowledged or not, of belief. And it is the reason for this belief – the justification of the unjustifiable – that must finally be poetically described (79).

The nomination of an event is necessarily poetic, and it most often occurs when the situation is, as Badiou writes “saturated by its own norm”; that is, when there is no gap between what is known about the situation and what can be predicted about the situation (IT 75). The poetic subject is one which, at this point, is able to nominate outside the situation. It is due to the infinite variability of language that we can rely on poetry to throw us outside of ourselves.

Badiou’s understanding of poetry is central to his philosophy and his poetic understanding is the foundation and centerpiece to his conception of art in general. Poetry acts as the counterbalance to the mathematical dianoia of his static model of Being, and its function is to allow for the eruption of the new idea from the old ideas: from present models of language emerges the new name.

Poetry is so central to Badiou’s thought that he considers writers such as Mallarmé and Hölderlin to be as important to the history of thought as Hegel and Kant, and identifies the crux of the post-modern problem to be an over-reliance on Heidegger’s
formulation of the poetic speech-act (IT 73). It is through poetry that Badiou sketches out the successes and failures of Plato in relationship to Heidegger, and it is to poetry that Badiou appeals when confronted with the rising paradox of Presence in philosophical thought (BE 255). He proposes an “Age of Poets” to explain the fracturing authority of philosophy in the face of the rapidly changing world and the consequent rise to dominance of the poetic statement (MP 69). Badiou casts himself at points as a Platonic figure, whose chief goal is to restore the order of the matheme to the chaos of poetic presentation, and yet he aims to avoid Plato’s “mistake” of exiling the poetic statement (IT 74). The push and pull between poetry and mathematics, Badiou believes, can be written across the entire history of philosophy, and without a recognition of the equally powerful and equally dangerous forces of mathematics and poetry, one is destined to swallow the other back and forth across time.

What Badiou proposes instead is that philosophy should be the very space where each is held in check by the other, where the “compossiblity” of the poetic and the mathematic is realized and subsequently explored.
3.1 Inaesthetics

The dichotomies that I have brought to bear up to this point are, I believe, indicative to the pattern of Badiou’s thought, or perhaps better: the pattern of thought he tasks himself with overcoming. It is in this sense that the modern dilemma of infinite position and totalitarian authority could also be understood as matheme and word, but as I have hope to have illustrated in the previous chapter, the stakes of the statement that mathematics is ontology also rest on just such a dichotomy: the infinite multiple, the authorizing count; the infinity of Being, the presentation of mathematics. Badiou often couches his arguments in just such a form, and it is in following such a form that I now address the function of art, and specifically poetry, in Badiou’s philosophy as both the enabler of and the balance to mathematics. Mathematics, without art, is naked presentation bereft of explanatory power, and therefore without relevance to a philosophy which would hope to address discourses which resist formalization.

Without a clear understanding of the poetic in reference to the mathematical it becomes impossible to approach literature with Badiou’s insights in ways other than schematic; indeed in his own literary analyses (which are quite strong), Badiou avoids mathematical schematization almost altogether. Yet Badiou’s critical work with prose and poetry revolves obsessively around a handful of themes and authors and leads me to
ask questions about the interaction between his work and literary analysis, most specifically: what types of poetry does Badiou allow?

I believe that what Badiou demonstrates in his own essays is a process of literary investigation which hinges on the impact of the poetic statement for another discourse: a political situation say, or an amorous situation. It is in this way that Badiou works through the question of the relevance of poetry specifically - and art in general - as the enunciation of a truth which will be or has been pursued in other areas of life.

The philosophical framework for these investigations, however, must first be sketched and the underpinnings of Badiou’s literary work are both dense and provocative. He proposes the term “inaesthetics” to discuss his stance towards philosophical reflection on works of art (HA 1). The term “inaesthetics” is cobbled together in Badiou’s typically ambitious fashion in order challenge the thinking of art from Aristotle forward. Badiou chooses such a term to best highlight the relationship between the thinking of art and the execution of art, effectively holding the two in a tension which prevents one from collapsing into the other. This approach enables both the thought and act of art to recognize and interact with one another in more productive ways.

Badiou views traditional aesthetics as a subsuming of art by philosophy, a line of thought which he believes stretches from Aristotle through Kant and up to but not including Heidegger. It is impossible, Badiou suggests, to employ tools for the critique of an ineffable object which were themselves unearthed by the very work’s manufacture (HA 5). But further, in Aristotle’s formulation of aesthetics (which Badiou takes as definitive), art is principally useful for its cathartic element, placing art in the realm of the
ethical (HA 4). Art in the classical schema is also, to Badiou's mind, placed at a remove from truth due to the assumption of art's reliance on verisimilitude, or likelihood, whereas philosophy was foremost concerned not with what was likely but with what was true, "the unlikely truth" (4). Art is then, in the classical schema, not a form of thought, but "a public service" (5).

Art should instead be understood as a general process of thinking the truth through works of art (9). The work of art itself is understood to be an enquiry and the localizable instant of truth, and yet is notable for its bounded-ness. Badiou's conception is radically different from not only the classical schema but also a more Romantic schema in which the work of art is a descent of the infinite into the finite (11). The work of art, Badiou believes, is instead a carving of the finite from the infinite, and its very finitude is its worth, insofar as its "persuasive" ability enables it to expose "its own organization in and by the finite framing of its presentation." By framing itself in such a way, the work then turns its borders "into the stakes of its existence." Imagined thusly, any addition to a work of art is a destruction of it (a transformation of it into something else) and so a work of art can be understood as the only truly finite thing. It can be identified by its ability to highlight the immensity of the infinite with this bounded presence (11). A truth, latent but previously untapped, is attested to and thereby activated by such works, and a constellation of these works constitute the artistic procedure of truth (12).

Such a broad understanding of a work of art begs interesting questions about works which have not been previously considered art, and in my estimation effectively lays the nomination of an artistic work at the feet of the subject so grasped by it.
If the work of art, then, is resistant to ontological critique, the term “inaesthetics” seem a better fit for speaking about art. The goal of inaesthetics is to study what Badiou refers to as “intraphilosophical” effects produced by the existence of works; that is, how the truth of art interacts with truths discovered elsewhere (1). The work of art can only be thought, finally, in philosophy (the only location, it seems, where real thinking may take place at all), but only if philosophy is understood to be a space in which art can be contested by forces which equal its productive power.

Inaesthetics operates by locating an artistic truth, and it does so through interventions into what Badiou terms “constellations” of artistic works (11). These constellations could be identified as grouped by time period, by medium, by artist; the parameters governing this first set are intentionally wide. From within a constellation inaesthetics hopes to identify a “configuration” (14). Such a configuration is presupposed to either exist or not from the outset, and the process of enquiry as operated by inaesthetics is bent on discovering the validity of the founding assertion. This process of enquiry reconstructs the artistic configuration locally; that is, it re-produces a pale copy of the arc of truth which has already taken place in the production of the art itself (14). All this means is that inaesthetics discusses, after the fact, a truth which has already occurred. The essay which makes the philosophical argument, then, is not the artistic truth itself. A moment of truth has already occurred in the artistic act – in the painting of a picture or in the writing of a poem. Philosophy reconstructs a series of these moments, an arc of truth, into a narrative. What such a narrative allows, specifically, is the recognition of what has not yet occurred, as well as the positing of a hypothesis of what
could occur in the future. At the same time, the philosophical narrative enables us to reflecting on the passage of truth through time, i.e. from one work of art to another.

A successful enquiry, one which locates a truth, effectively forges a connection between given works of art and makes manifest a previously latent attestation to an identical truth (14). Note that Badiou’s method does not treat the art work directly, but only as an element in an analysis; this is due to his firm belief that the art work cannot be known. To become concerned with the inherent “meaning,” or lost implication of a work of art is again to misunderstand the piece in and of itself (11). Critique, here, is entirely anchored in a position which is in the service of a truth.

The traditional epochs in art history – Classical or Romantic – are, I believe, excellent examples of such an analysis as Badiou recommends, assuming we take chronological time to be the primary boundary of investigation. It should be noted, however, that while a work of art may attest to a given truth, no work can be totalized by that truth (11). Works of art, as finite examples of the infinite, inevitably escape analysis. A poem by Keats is not, in the end, an example of Romantic poetry, but the reverse.

In a quirky (or perhaps convenient), homage to Lacan, Badiou chooses to explain the presence of art in the representational state of the situation through the model of the tripartite knot. Badiou ties the term “art” to those of “education” and “philosophy,” and the implications of such a model are interesting in and of themselves (5).

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3 In Badiou's conception, a poem by Keats could be understood as taking part in the arc of truth that could be identified as Romantic, but this in no way exhausts the poem. What "Romantic poetry" is, I understand Badiou to imply, is merely a collection of poems which share similar traits. These poems exist without the modifier "Romantic," but an understanding of "Romantic poetry" would not exist without these poems. Further, a Keats poem may very well be indicative of another sort of poetry that is not Romantic. The larger point is that the poem sustains through any and all past, present and future analysis of it.
Is it impossible, we could ask, to represent philosophy in the state without tying it to education and a third term? Is it impossible to represent education without philosophy? In his given tripartite model, Badiou seems to view “art” as the engine which turns the knot; “philosophy” is necessary insofar as art must be thought; “education” necessary insofar as art must be explained, received and passed on (5).

We are currently in a stage, Badiou believes, in which the thinking of art is destitute, and this has led to a virtual standstill in the understanding of art. The danger of such a situation is the de-legitimation of art in concrete reality. Without a way of speaking art, its significant power for change within society lies untapped. This standstill is a result of an imbalance in the tripartite knot, in which the term “art” has gained the upper hand over “philosophy” and “education” (IT 73).

This is due to a Heidegger-induced solipsism in regards to thinking art. Other periods (Marxist periods, for example) have seen education gain the upper hand in the relationship; in such a situation, the state takes control of art and utilizes it as a tool in the education of the People (HA 5). If philosophy, on the other hand, gains control art becomes a useful fiction or a pleasant diversion from more weighty matters; this is, in a way, the hope of Plato and the reality of the scientist, in which art, being the semblance of a semblance, is imaginary (4).

In present-day thought, art holds sway over philosophy and education in the representation of its own truth. In this situation, any attempt towards a logical analysis of

4 Marxist periods could be understood as Soviet Russia certainly, but Badiou places his emphasis here on the contribution of Brecht. In these terms “art, under surveillance [of politics], is a therapy against cowardice”; this is Platonic (and so in Badiou’s terms “didactic”) in the sense that the state is valued over art; it is further Platonic in the sense that art has no direct contact with truth but is capable of showing, due the process by which semblance is alienated from itself, in the “gap...the...objectivity of the true” (HA 6)
artistic truth has become an impenetrable encumbrance to the proper flowering of art. Critical explanation has, in essence, been devalued, because it hinders art instead of helping it and Badiou believes that this is due directly to Heidegger’s conception of poetry as the end of speech: that the poem and its interpretation function as the premier example of mortal finitude opening into truth (HA 7).

I believe that the more recent return to a Neo-Kantian evaluation of aesthetics is indicative of the periodic urge to balance and organize what I understand Badiou to say is the inherently chaotic truth of art. This urge to revisit aesthetics seems to emerge in times of discomfort and ambiguity but ultimately this aesthetics inevitably attempts to tame the artwork as opposed to understanding it; to step back away from Heidegger, not step past him. For Badiou it is not only important but necessary to move beyond Heidegger, because only if the current age can unbind itself from his thinking can it re-energize art’s ability to transform itself, and thereby transform our world.

3.2. Heidegger and Plato

Heidegger is the only thinker, in Badiou’s estimation, to successfully move past Aristotle’s aesthetics and pull art out from underneath philosophy’s influence (IT 73). Heidegger does this by maintaining a strict differentiation between knowledge and truth: rather than utilizing what is already known to move towards truth, it is the creative capacity of art which allows access to truth. Art is the vehicle for surpassing that which is known, and the very act of doing so is an artistic one. The poetic thought, Heidegger
states, lies outside of the encyclopedia of knowledge and operates from an otherwise unreachable place (73). The establishment and maintenance of this place of poetic thought is Heidegger’s chief contribution to Badiou’s understanding of art: the poem exists to *counter* knowledge rather than to sustain it (73).

Badiou is particularly taken with Hölderlin; it is with this poet, he believes, that philosophy begins to lose touch with its ability to enunciate its own time. Tied as philosophy became to the effects of science and politics, Hölderlin represents a decisive break in thought from what philosophy was committed to understanding (MP 69). What Hölderlin is able to capture in his poetry is a rising incoherence erupting into the narrative of civilization, and it is only the poem which provides both the strength and the flexibility to sustain an examination of an increasingly dis-associative process (70). The example of Hölderlin is also crucial to Badiou because it is with Heidegger’s reading of the poet that Heidegger clearly demonstrates how the relationship between the poem and philosophy can be mutually beneficial, as opposed to, as Plato insisted, detrimental.

Badiou allows that the poem damages philosophy, certainly, but it does so by buffeting philosophy with a Being it would otherwise be helpless to explain. The poem challenges philosophy with its ineffable harmony, its fleeting effect, destroyed the more it is uncovered (HA 25). While the syntactical cause of the deep effect of poetry can perhaps be identified, as one identifies a physical object, the cause does not explain the effect itself. Stripped of this anchor in objectivity, the poem cannot be understood as objectively true, but subjectively true (25). In its movement towards truth, it moves not
from an objective world to the universal truth, but rather from the personal – be it writer or reader – to the universal.

But Heidegger goes too far with his privileging of the poetic act, essentially assigning it the position of the only endpoint of knowledge and the only opening of the true. The effects of this decision are to “hand philosophy over to poetry” (MP 74). By refusing to acknowledge other pathways to truth, Heidegger in effect de-legitimizes philosophy as a pursuit.

Heidegger’s mistake, Badiou believes, is his misunderstanding of Plato’s gesture towards Number (IT 74). It should be remembered, Badiou writes, that Plato’s elevation of the mathematical over the poetic was itself a radical intervention into the progression of philosophical practice up to that time. In the writings of Heraclitus and Parmenides, for example, the philosophical statement is held fast by poetic effect, an effect which Badiou identifies as a hindrance to the universal address philosophy struggles to achieve (71). This hindrance is due to the particularity of the Sophist statement and the circumstances of its enunciation. Philosophy before Plato is executed in riddle and metaphor; its statements are intentionally indirect due to the assumption of the existence of an ineffable knowledge which the speaker can gesture towards but never wholly capture (70).

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5 Badiou aligns the classical Sophists to present-day post-modern theorists in their belief in the exclusive power of the poem or, perhaps more precisely, poetic effects in language, to convey a thought that is non-thought. To proclaim instead of explain, to gesture towards instead of investigate; these, Badiou is saying, exist in the realm of the poem which is able to exhibit Presence, and the when the poetic is used as a primary mode by those who aspire to philosophy, the result of sophistry. For Badiou the idea turns on the word “sacred,” in that the danger posed by both the classical Sophists and the post-moderns is the cordoning off of a knowledge that exists, can be intuited, yet cannot be systematically grasped. This construct is useful for Badiou in that he is then able to position Plato's mathematic intervention in the name of truth as the model for his own intervention; Plato against the Sophists, himself against the post-moderns.
The entire function of Plato’s philosophy is to then tear away this rhetorical veil, to separate thought from the sacred, and to secularize the statement. Badiou believes that Heidegger ignores the circumstances of Plato’s intervention and therefore falls into what Badiou identifies as a Romantic trap: coupling the effect of poetic speech to philosophy (HA 3). In the absence of Number, such a procedure inevitably leads to the end of philosophy as a vital practice. Poetry cannot be elevated at the expense of the matheme because when the truth of art collapses into the event of its own making, the possibility arises that the truth of the poem could be easily confused with the act of its execution (HA 11). In which case, the poem becomes the sacred act of the holy artist. To follow Heidegger here, Badiou believes, leads philosophy back into the Romantic trap of again recasting art as a poor imitation of Christian resurrection.

It is with Plato’s championing of mathematics that the enunciation of the Sophist statement begins to lose its power. The abstraction possible in mathematics enables us to expose the Sophist argumentation to the test of its autonomy (IT 71). This is why philosophy, as a critical procedure, flourishes in Greece at Plato’s time. Plato himself was a singular event (71).

If the principles of mathematics are understood to imbue even the most commonplace statements, it becomes possible to test assertions of truth against the most abstract of conceptions instead of, as the Sophists do, falling back on the authority of the unspeakable sacred power. Plato’s revolution neuters poetic language for the purpose of secularizing thought, and so the poem, for Plato, becomes very dangerous because it is a step backwards in thinking.
The poem for Plato seduces the reader without offering any firm conception. Without reference to an eternal Idea, the poem demands a legitimation of its own statement. Mathematics, on the other hand, offers a support for logic that poetry, almost by its very nature, subverts. Mathematics allows for a truly universal statement, one in which all humanity can participate, not merely marvel at, bow in the presence of, and accept.

Plato’s attack on the poem, as Badiou understands it, hinges on the notion that the poem is at a twofold distance from the Idea: it is a secondary imitation of a primary imitation constituted by the sensible. A poem is imitative; a poem is mimetic; a poem is not, in any way, real (HA 17). Yet if poetic language is so blatantly false, Badiou asks why Plato has such a masterful control of it. Would not a writer who has taken such great pains to familiarize himself with poetic effect have a greater respect for the language which initiates it?

But the true danger of the poem for Plato, Badiou believes, lies in its opposition to dianoia or discursive thought. The problem with the poem is that it does not allow a statement that it does not include within itself. The poetic exclaims its truth as truth and brokers no further investigation. Dianoia, on the other hand, traverses facts; it fashions links between elements. It deduces answers. It follows laws in its cataloging of elements (17). A poem, however, is a “lawless proposition” (17). Poetic language is poetic because it requires no support for its chaotic assertion. “God,” poetics allows us to assert, “is a shout in the street.”
As such, poetry is both powerful and dangerous; a skillful manipulation of syntax can be used to proclaim much more insidious statements than the populist nature of God. The check to this danger is simple, laborious calculation. Numbers and their accompanying laws allow us to weigh, to measure, and to eventually make decisions based on plain, replicable results. Mathematics pulls philosophy down from the poetic space and, for Plato, allows us to anchor ourselves in the facts of our existence (18).

But Plato’s chief concern (and the relevant danger of poetry lies in this), is the ability of poetry to affect politics. “He who lends an ear” Plato wrote of poetry, “must be on guard fearing for the polity in his soul.” The “polity of the soul,” if understood on a societal scale, is in danger from poetry for two reasons: one, in order for politics to seize and exercise real power it must address a “subjective collective” - a group of which each member is affected in a similar fashion – and two: such a collective is doubly vulnerable to the fervor that poetics can arouse, as evidenced in the political movements of a Hitler, Stalin or Mao; the totalitarian authority (18). Badiou writes that politics must first and foremost be bound to laborious calculation because, for Plato, the stakes are so high. A mistake in the exercise of state power is magnified across a society, and to bind up the poetic power of the unsubstantiated assertion with the rhetorical methods of emotional seduction invites political disaster of the worst kind (18).

Plato bans the poet from the Republic, Badiou believes, due to the philosopher’s own inability to allow both poetry and discursive thought to co-habitate an identical space. The power of poetry would, for Plato, eventually swallow dianoia whole. This is
not idle speculation; it actually occurs within Plato’s own text in his discussion of the Good (19).

It is finally Plato’s Good that is essential for the organization and, thereby, thought of Plato’s discursive philosophy, and yet the existence of the Good is paradoxical in the blind obedience its demands (19). When Plato, then, reaches for a support for discursive thought, he is forced to be non-discursive. He is forced to appeal to poetic images such as the sun and Er returning from the dead. This is not, Badiou points out, so much the evidence of the failure of Plato’s project as of its limits. Each philosopher’s limit in fact can be recognized by his or her invocation of poetic language; it signals the point in which thought must be opened from the sensible to the purely thinkable. It is in this way that poetry proves itself to be beyond the sensible. Poetry begins when, as Badiou writes, “thought must be absorbed in the grasp of what establishes it as thought” (20).

3.3 Hölderlin to Celan

Badiou categorizes the relationship between poetry and philosophy in three ancient stages: that of Parmenides, in which poetry is used to explicate logical thoughts; that of Plato, in which poetry is excluded for the sake of a less exclusionary mode of discursive thought; finally that of Aristotle, which is the triumph of philosophy over poetry insofar as the aesthetic categorization of Aristotle bounds the discussion of the poem to a priori principles (IT 70-1). Only Heidegger, Badiou concludes, is finally able
to think past Aristotle, but his maneuver effectively dismantles philosophy in the face of art and has given reign, ever since, to a Parmenidian (that is, post-modern), school of critical discussion.

What Heidegger was specifically able to do, in Badiou's mind was to "have crossed the specifically philosophical critique of objectivity with its poetic destitution" (MP 73). What this means, for Badiou, is the Heidegger recognized the poetic attack on the object (and then the subject); he recognized the poetic basis not in knowledge but in truth-as-thought (as opposed to cognition), and he recognized the "essential disorientation of our epoch" (MP 75).

The poetic revolution that occurred in the century leading up to Heidegger’s intervention Badiou identifies as the “Age of Poets,” which begins with Hölderlin and ends with Celan. It is this period which sought to stake a place for poetics after Hegel (MP 69). Poetry alone - not tied to politics, the dialectic, or science - could codify the increasing dissolution of Western thought in the years from Hegel to Auschwitz. This was done, according to Badiou, through poetry’s unique ability to tie its word to its subject of experience in the interest of demonstrating Presence (72).

Badiou understands Presence in his essay “Age of Poets” to be an enunciation of that which exists, if not existence itself. He ties this notion in with his own meta-ontology through the term “presentation,” which is the first collective of Being, a grouping of Being before the naming and categorizing of the “representation.” In this

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6 My treatment here of Badiou’s “Age” hews closely and uncritically to Badiou’s own conception; a conception, it should be noted, which is delivered as a Manifesto and is more declarative than explanatory. Badiou’s reading of Mallarmé in particular is unique and provocative, and in the interest of delivering the clearest exposition of that reading, (the best way, I believe, to identify Badiou’s position) I have chosen to simply recapitulate Badiou’s own statements.
sense, the poem assumes that Being can be collected as a whole and yet, due the work of
the poets Badiou cites, it does so without assigning to Being an objective category.
Poetry proclaims without justification while, especially in the poetry of Mallarmé,
displaying a cognizance of this absence of justification. It may do this either additively
or subtractively but each poet of the Age attacks the subject/object relation that ever-
increasingly dogs (in Badiou’s formulation) science and history.

Only poetry, in the face of the rise of national politics and empirical science,
could provide the most naked manifestation of the Presence which silently underlies these
other conditions; as such, Badiou identifies a series of poets from Hölderlin to Celan as
crafting the most true, honest and real discourse of its chronological era insofar as it made
no effort to cover its total reliance on the sacred speaker. Badiou points to Nietzsche as
the first thinker of this age to recognize and attack the rising paradox of Presence in
philosophy, and the poetic slant of his writings is key in this regard; Nietzsche is, in
Badiou’s mind, poetry’s great revenge on Plato and all Continental thought of the 20th
century follows in Nietzsche’s footsteps, fathering a line of poetic philosophy up to the
present day (70).

Poetry’s unapologetic Presence in the years from Hölderlin to Celan enables it to
codify the rising incoherence of the period; only in poetics could a legitimate History be
spoken, as its more academic manifestations were systematically exposed to be so many
fictions. The assumed supremacy of empiricism, on the other hand, forbade all
narratives. The politics of the times utilized poetics in the service of its own totalitarian
narratives, but only in poetry could a number of such “truths” mingle equally; that is, without mutually eclipsing one another.

Badiou’s formulation of the “Age of Poets” is an excellent example of the very kind of enquiry he asserts philosophy should make into a constellation of art. If all poets from Hölderlin to Celan could be understood as a “constellation,” Badiou then enters such a constellation armed with a belief in the necessity of Presence, along with the necessity of the poetic demolition of the object, in order to identify a configuration of poets whose work attests to this truth: poetic thought approaches Being without reference to Thing. He identifies Hölderlin, Mallarmé, Rimbaud, Trakl, Pessoa, Mandelstam and Celan, as the poets who come to rely on language itself - its underlying effects - to achieve the poetic effect without the description of or appeal to anything outside of the poem’s own inter-relations. These poets eventually eliminated not only the object but the subject as well in order to avoid the kind of subjectification – of the Author, of the Reader – that can easily slip into objectification (HA 22).

In Mallarmé, for example, only the poem exists; it is an extension which addresses only its mirrored extension. Badiou points out this process of extension minus the object occurs not on a symbolic level – on a level of desiring subject – but on a level of pure signifiers (22). Only the signifiers interact across the divide; the words are purified of symbolic meaning, floating instead on the currents of chance allowed by syntax. Mallarmé organizes sensory presentations to literally turn sensation into idea: when the poet writes “night, star, gems,” Badiou speculates, to what, or to who, does the poet appeal?
Nothing directly. I understand Badiou to be saying here that the poem imagined thus is a form of inconsistency, as Being, in-consisting (MP 72). The poem allows Presence to be neither objective nor subjective, but becomes the very vehicle of it; Mallarmé’s poems are the manifestation of Presence itself in the world (72). The subject is displaced; the object, a notion which occurs at the moment of the reflection of its pure present. There is no object, Mallarmé will assert, there is only the poem which provides - which is - the bridge between the inconceivable and the understood. Only the assertion of Presence, stripped bare in the poem, allows our mind to capture a world.\footnote{Badiou’s reading of Mallarmé is, I believe, strategic. His goal is to unite these poets on the basis of their commitment to grammar, and a conflation exists on Badiou’s part between the poet’s decision to eliminate a subject or eliminate an object. It could be that Badiou would imagine the poets to attempt to eliminate anything “objectify-able” (such as a the notion of “subject”), and thereby no conflation would have occurred, but on this point he is unclear.}

It is important to remember, Badiou insists, that at this very moment in history, mathematics was in the process of uncovering its own inconsistency. Math, it became obvious for 19\textsuperscript{th} century theorists, could never know itself, revealed as it was as an inconsistent consistency (HA 20). Poetry on the other hand was in the process of proving itself to be a \emph{consistent} inconsistency, a method for revealing the process of arbitrary structure impressed on the chaos of Being (MP 72). Modernity begins, Badiou writes, when the poem becomes the ideal expression of Being, and mathematics becomes a self-referential sophistry; the poem, in Modernity, has a closer resemblance to observable “reality” than does math, and it is specifically at this point that the foundation of traditional aesthetics is washed away; the relationship between the poetic and the sensible has been overturned (HA 21).
No longer can the poem be thought of as the sensible form of the Idea, because the sensible itself is presented within the poem; the poem impacts the sensible, not the reverse. “The visibility of artifice” Badiou writes, “is the thinking of poetic thought” (21). This means that due to the exploitation of syntax that occurred in this time period from Hölderlin to Celan - the removal of all but the power of inter-relational grammar - poetry used the myriad impacts of a word to surpass what the sensible had been previously capable of.

Yet poetry is, Badiou reminds us, completely powerless (23). Although poetry is in direct contact with the truth of Presence, truth and totality are incompatible. It is the fact of the letter, as a relational object, that stymies the truth of the poem from being a totality, even of that very poem. If consistency is the unnameable of mathematics - that which must be assumed from the outside for the inside to operate - then language itself is the unnameable of poetry (26). Poetry cannot name language, since its very existence is based on the infinite resources thereof; on the perpetual “novelty of its assemblage.” This is the gamble of poetry: the faith in intelligibility, the belief in the structure of the latent power of syntax. It is within syntax, finally, that the power of poetry resides, and it is syntax which allows for the contrast between presence and absence to be made manifest in language (25).

And yet again, because it is a structure, syntax is essentially useless from within a situation. It is a Real without a truth, and therefore, while necessary, its literal impact on the practice of philosophy is negligible. It is similar to saying the skeleton is essential for
love; even if the spirit is a bone, the spirit’s relationship to the situation is beyond utterance due to the fact that its absence would negate the very possibility of such a situation.

In the situation, the poem can be true, but its meaning can never be ascertained; such a thing as “meaning” is again as negligible as a structure. Meaning abounds; truth is what parses it. The poem points to this truth – not to Truth, but to a single truth, existent, totally inexpressible; the unlocatable support.
CHAPTER 4
ELIOT’S DILEMMA

It is difficult, if not altogether fruitless, to assert the independence of Badiou’s thought from those of the high moderns that preceded him. A strong case could be made tracing lines of ancestry from the French structuralists of the middle of the last century (of whom Badiou is a direct descendent) back to the work of Stein and Pound and Joyce and so forth. Such a case could be imagined as hinging on the succession of treatments of the themes of authority and position, each one dialectically working against the other throughout the course of the century.

But the kernel of this entire case rests with Mallarmé. It is with Mallarmé that we first have such themes clearly presented; indeed Badiou returns to Mallarmé with obsessive regularity. It is also Mallarmé (along with Rimbaud and Baudelaire) who became the principle influence to writers at the turn of the century who strove to be “modern.” It is particularly Mallarmé’s use of language and form in a pursuit of revealing syntactical presence that provides the key connection for thinking through Badiou’s understanding the poetics of modernity, and Mallarmé is also essential for uncovering critically theoretical approaches to this poetic thought. Consequently, the ties between Eliot, Pound and Badiou are strongest if viewed through this central figure.

Aestheticism and a distinctly Victorian sensibility were already prevalent in Britain at the turn of the century and the resulting British version of symbolism, clouded as it was by several competing and distinct ideologies, amounted to a corruption of a
Mallermean project insofar as its poetry eschewed direct investigations of language as a phenomenon, and, as Hugh Kenner has pointed out, it is against this British corruption of French Symbolism that both Pound and Eliot initially bent their creative and their critical efforts. To be modern, in many ways, was to attempt to recover the spirit of Mallarmé’s poetics and express such a spirit through the clearest vernacular of the time (Kenner 107). It is in this way that both poetic and critical work became, for the moderns, not a representation of an abstract (or lost) ideal, but the very presentation of an abstract and generic process.

Despite the reputation it currently holds as a rather old-fashioned text, I believe that if we look to Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” we can find Eliot at his most experimental, fusing the poetic elements of Mallarmé’s presentation with the form of the critical essay, in effect risking the very parameters of the form in the interest of presenting – rather than representing – the concept he circles in the language of the text. Such a process, successful here, is one he attempts to replicate in The Waste Land, which itself is successful insofar as Eliot relinquishes his own control of the investigation to Pound, who, utilizing these same principles, crafts the preeminent modern poetic statement. The failure of that poem – its inability to provide a conclusion to its restless search for a position of salvation free from a God who would grant it – is a failure only insofar as we view it as a failure of modernism in total. We can find Eliot’s dissatisfaction with such a non-conclusion in the dramatically different tone his poetry takes in the aftermath of this success, but Pound, in his criticism, does not turn away from the problematics of modernism and attempts to provide, in “The Chinese Written
Character as Medium for Poetry,” a direction out of the waste land of God and man. In the next chapter I work through some of the implications of these statements.

Eliot’s work in “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” however, exemplifies what I take to be a successful enquiry into Badiouan truth; a excellent model of what such a procedure should be. My reading of this text is informed by Badiou in ways which help me demarcate the key moments in the shifting text insofar as what Eliot is able to accomplish here harmonizes easily with Badiou’s conception of enquiry. This is a case, I believe, not so much of attempting to squeeze Eliot into yet another critical framework, so much as a demonstration of a successful engagement with the modern problem both Eliot and Badiou share: the infinity of the setting, the threat of the master, and a search for a process which will illuminate a relevant, material end.  

It has become customary to approach Eliot’s critical work by drawing distinctions between two differing versions of Eliot in the interest of reaching a synthetic third. In such a revisionary procedure we are often encouraged to recognize in Eliot a fellow traveler of our own, present age. Such an approach gains its popularity from its frequent success, due in large part to the fact that Eliot remains our contemporary as much as any other true artist.

If we examine, however, the past two generations of criticism we can detect two separate branches of thought which sprout from the New Critical canonization of Eliot.

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8 Eliot is naturally a disciple of Bradley and utilizes the dialectic in a fashion influenced by him directly. The cultural aspects of Eliot’s thought, particularly his invocation of the Mind of Europe, escape my analysis here, principally due to its orientalist nature which, while certainly evident and essential for any thorough analysis of Eliot’s critical program necessitate a consideration of a larger pathology within Eliot’s body of work.
Rather than attempt a synthesis of these two seemingly different modes of reading – one historical, one hermeneutic – I would suggest that each path turns progressively closer to the text and further from the received and by now ossified notions of Eliot the critic and the poet. In M.A.R. Habib’s *The Early T.S. Eliot and Western Philosophy* we find a recent representation of this historical approach, which hews closely to a traditional - and traditionally American - critical interpretation, while with Daniel O’Hara, “The Unsummoned Image,” we find a method of reading which draws its inspiration from a more Continental mode.9

Yet each approach remains rooted in the notions of a distanced, dry, urbane and, ultimately, *ironic* Eliot. Such a view Eliot himself doubtlessly encouraged at different points in his career, but in an analysis of “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” it is a position at odds with the textual evidence and it is a position which founders on the same rock as Eliot himself in the essay, which is one of authorial positioning. Key to the critiques of both Habib and O’Hara is the question: from where does Eliot speak? It is a question that vexes Eliot as well and one which ultimately powers the very movement of the essay itself. But the stances of Habib and O’Hara each take us partway through the text, and we must move through and past these readings in a effort less to locate than to *enunciate* the movement and direction of the essay.

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9 My work here with Eliot does not stray too far from Shusterman’s (*T.S. Eliot and the Philosophy of Criticism*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999). We both hope to identify the base paradox of Eliot’s stance. Shusterman, however, imagines Eliot’s models as “living” organic forms where I imagine them mathematically (59). Also, where Shusterman utilizes a classically philosophical approach to the essay, invoking Russel and Moore, my approach is guided by a more psychoanalytic framework, drawing principally from a Lacanian model of reading.
It is impossible to approach the essay without an analysis of the dialectics Eliot employs throughout. Habib has suggested these dialectics are used in an effort to ultimately re-install tradition in the transcendental position of the lost Christian God (167). This analysis is vital towards understanding the dense and complex movements of the first half of Eliot’s essay, but fails to take the reader further into the loose and paradoxical second half. O’Hara goes further than Habib, analyzing the stakes of the failure of the dialectic, suggesting that its breakdown is a demonstration by Eliot of the unsuitability of argumentation to the ideas he presents (103). What these two readings have in common is an ironic notion of Eliot, operating behind the text, presenting what would amount to a didactic piece of criticism about, essentially, how to survive in a meaningless world: for Habib: how to install aesthetics in the place of religion; for O’Hara: how to come to terms with the failure of received knowledge.

I would suggest the piece is, instead, about doing criticism. Going further, I would suggest that the essay works through itself admirably, completing the arc of its own intention. And far from the austere Eliot so familiar to us from a Modern stereotype, if Eliot there be in the text, I believe it is one who is “surrendering himself wholly to the work to be done” (SW 59).

Building from O’Hara’s critique, I suggest the essay is a series of critical failures, enacted in the interest not of a Nietzschean revaluation of the critical project as a whole, but in the pursuit of a simplistic belief in the accessibility of truth. In an unflagging desire to fulfill the promise of the title of the essay itself, Eliot becomes a subject of his own text, exploring and exhausting in turn each of his critical tools, in an effort to locate
and name the figure of tradition and talent. Eliot commits himself fully to the operation of his critical apparatus, clearing away his own biases, plunging into and through his own expectations. It is in such a paradoxical abandonment to activity which is a testament to Eliot’s willingness to fall into truth, and impels me to read “Tradition and the Individual Talent” as itself “a passive attending upon the event” (58).

Influenced primarily by Bradley, Eliot utilizes dialectics to construct a model of truth in the first half of the essay, only to discard this model as an insufficient reflection of the notion his desires to express. As an antidote to this formalized contraption he has built, Eliot throws aside his critical mask and confesses his way into the worst Romantic sentimentalizing. Seemingly appalled to find himself in such a position (appalled to realize that he is, at bottom, so un-Modern), Eliot picks up the broken and discarded dialectic and symptomatically uses Pound as a bridge to ride his own faulty symbolic logic into the very real abyss of his own jumbled storehouse of signifiers, knocking around in the fragments that he will, with luck, shore against his ruins.

It is in this way that we can begin to erase the historic specter of the ironic Eliot: we hone our attention on to how the text struggles with the role of an assigned transcendental position, noting how such a struggle can be waged, how it fails, and how it can only be picked up and tried again.

Frederic Jameson’s understanding of the dialectic method, especially in his essay “Lacan and the Dialectic: A Fragment” helps to elucidate the overall movement of a text that becomes more slippery the closer one draws to it; but for the key points of the text I draw from the work not only of Badiou but of the later Lacan; specifically in an effort to
illustrate the necessity of models, the failure of the dialectic, the eruption of the singularity, and the Beckettian assertion, proved out by the text, that when we cannot go on, we can only go on.

The essay is in total a dialectic, and at one and the same time is about the dialectic. There are, at a rough estimate, at least nine dialectics introduced in the twelve-page essay. From the second sentence: “We cannot refer to ‘the tradition,’” a perpetual relationship to absence is established to which the essay repeatedly returns, and it is this very relationship to absence that the dialectic method attempts to dramatize and hopes to symbolically encode (47).

The several mini-dialectics that sprout and fade throughout the essay, oftentimes within a few lines, do so without direct connection to one another. These little whirlpools in a larger stream and are deployed with what Jameson refers to as “an awareness of incommensurability,” that is: an understanding that the projected synthesis of one dialectic is not the thesis of another (373). This, Jameson has noted, is a more proper deployment of the dialectic method as a whole – it is not intended to provide an answer to a problem, but to linguistically register the failure of a problem’s proposed solution. The incommensurability that the dialectic highlights – the inability of language to leap across the gulfs of varying situational reality, “registers and domesticates the necessity of failure,” and it is this appreciation and acceptance of the necessity of failure which lies behind the deployment of the dialectic itself – a failure which constitutes a brand of philosophical endeavor (373).
Understood in this way the dialectic is a juxtaposition; a series of demonstrated relations of the presented paradox. Further, a series of dialectics, such as we find with Eliot here, serves to juxtapose several approaches to an identical problem, with full knowledge that there is no other way within language to approach it.

This unspoken and perhaps unspeakable knowledge – this supposed position outside of language – is ultimately an *ironic* position, and Jameson points out that such a position can be understood as a gross simplification of an unsolvable question; it is an invocation of a meta-language into which the author can languidly repose (375). Such an approach, besides sidestepping the very point of the dialectic altogether (that is, the process of a definition of terms and their relationality) inevitably falls in upon itself, due to the risk it poses to condemn to *silence* whoever aspires to such a position. Eliot's struggles with the dialectic emanate from this paradox of silence, but more specifically from a question of who, or what, is privileged enough to occupy silence itself.

Able to assert, for example, that events occur in the artistic process, Eliot continually struggles with how to properly explain their occurrence. In his best analysis of the moment of artistic creativity, he refers to a “pressure”: a movement of the mind from one space into another space which must, ostensibly, already be occupied (55). The poet, for Eliot, must access some present, underlying, controlling Other and *must be used by it*, as opposed to using it. This he asserts with the force of sheer belief and it is because of this belief that Eliot forces himself, in the course of the essay, to fall from irony.
Habib points out that Eliot aims to reserve for tradition a transcendental space, but Eliot’s struggle with this simple sublimation is, to my mind, that in the role of critic, Eliot himself is a mouthpiece for such a conception of tradition (167). This transcendental space is, then, one which he himself occupies. Such a space had “traditionally” been reserved for a more theological agent, but has now become vacated and filled, in a moment, with the term “tradition,” of which Eliot himself is representative.

If the transcendental space is to be cleared in the interest of installing tradition, and if the critic is the representation of such tradition, Eliot in essence installs himself as a transcendental figure, a deity of the text, an author, ironic and above and behind the language, paring his nails. And it is such a position, such an understanding of the authorial role, which proves irreconcilable for a writer who believes the creative process is one of surrender, for who else is there to surrender to if one has already installed oneself as God?

Struggling with the implications of this relationship, Eliot utilizes the dialectic in the opening pages as a tool, a piece of objective, critical machinery. And so from the second page on, Eliot refuses to directly address tradition, allowing that it “involves” what he calls the “historical sense”; as though this “sense,” graspable and manageable, is some kind of projection from a more removed tradition (49). And yet, almost the line after providing a handle to “tradition,” in the form of “historical sense”, Eliot escapes the burden of defining “historical sense” by writing that it, in turn, “involves” a very particular kind of “perception” (49). This perception entails (and this is just the first instance of how Eliot introduces competing dialectics by forcing a movement from word
to word) an understanding of, first: the pastness of the past (the past-as-not-present); and second: the presence of the past (the past-as-present).

Eliot then terms these elements the “timeless” and the “temporal”, and the historical sense – as he rises from this specificity to generality – is the realization that only by understanding that it is the nature of temporality to emerge from a more base and more original timelessness can a writer hope to attain a fusion - a *synthesis* - of these two elements (49). Once such a synthesis is attained can a writer write with what amounts to an Absolute Knowledge of time. This knowledge is what makes a writer traditional (a good thing) and what allows him access to tradition-as-such.

The movement of the critique here is solid, clean and complete: the understanding that the present exists only in its own mortality is the historical sense, which a writer must possess. The knowledge of the information presented, in dialectical fashion, must be grasped at once and in total. The historical sense is, then, an Absolute Knowledge of literary time. Yet this is not all of tradition. This knowledge allows the writer to only *partake* in tradition, from which the historical sense was earlier partitioned off.

“No poet,” the text proceeds, somewhat cryptically, “…has his complete meaning” (49). Such a drastic shift in direction seems to act as a hedge or contradiction in the preceding proof – as though, having presented us with a total knowledge and a reason for its necessity, Eliot wants to back away from its very totality with the introduction of “meaning”; a term absent in the earlier dialectic. It is through the substitution of new words for previously worked-through concepts that Eliot moves from dialectic to dialectic, but what is interesting about the movement is that it occurs with no
explanation, only juxtaposition. O’Hara points out that this kind of juxtaposition functions as the true gateway into the meaning of Eliot’s essays, for it is in these silences that Eliot resides, ironic and aloof, and in this section, which is still very much in control, I am inclined to agree (111). This control, however, does not last.

In the new dialectic concerning “meaning”, we find it placed in relation to “the dead”. In this mini-dialectic, the significance of the artist is the absolute knowledge of the existence of the relation of his own work to past work; the critic must place the living “among the dead” and the significance of the artist is to be understood as the valence of the living dead (49).

What this has done is set up, in a region almost outside the text itself, a difference between artist and critic – but I would allow that it merely introduces such a relation, and does not explore it with any clear purpose or rigor. It seems almost like a MacGuffin, toyed with in order to distract attention from what is of more importance to the text in these lines: the introduction of the living dead. It is in their company that the first key turn of the text is accomplished, the discussion of the Ideal Order.

“The existing monuments,” Eliot writes “form an ideal order among themselves” (50). The living dead form a coherent structure – a structure which has both always been and always will be. Yet this structure is “modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them” (50). The nature of this structure, then, is as follows: it exists; it has always existed; it is composed of immortal monuments; it is constantly modified – always changing; it is only the “really new” which changes it.
What is of supreme importance here is the idea of Order. It must, in Eliot’s words “persist” (50). There is nothing without first the order, or the situation of great art. It exists, like a founding axiom, and always has existed. And yet in order for the Order to persist in time, it must constantly change. It is, then, a permanently changing stasis. The treatment of the Order, introduced lines ago as the immortal collection of the dead – the supreme dead to be contrasted to (and installed above) the vicissitudes of the present-day artist – must now give way before something which rises above it: the new. The Order, introduced as immortal, is in effect trapped in time, composed as it is of the names of those who have already existed in time.

But we cannot even assert here that the structure of the order is beyond time, since its shape is constantly changing. By very dint of its possession of a shape, something else, shapeless, rises above it, before it, outside of it, conditioning it; this is, as Eliot puts it, the “really new”. There is, then, the artist, who must measure himself against the immortals, who are immortal due to the result of their measurement against…what exactly is “really new”?

We could answer this question with “the new artist,” thereby demonstrating what Eliot means when he discusses two notions that measure themselves against one another (50). But we cannot measure the dead against just any artist; it would be one, we could imagine, who must work with a historical sense or, in other words, one who takes a part in tradition. And yet that line of thought leads us back to the Order once more, since the Order is the manifestation of tradition itself. We are confronted here with the need to
demarcate something larger, something completely outside of time. What is at stake here is the condition of art itself.

We must examine, what I believe, to be in microcosm an example with what the entire essay struggles – the role of existence in relation to the nonexistent, which asserts its supremacy over existence in the eruption of the new. This in turn impels us to address what “really new” art is. Certainly it is something of extreme rarity, yet it has always existed, apparently, for what else are the “monuments” that form the ideal order but examples of it? The “really new” will also always exist, for what else is there to continue the process of re-ordering? Art is then placed in an un-described, eternal and radically generic position, outside of, yet constantly intersecting with, a more concrete order of monuments.

We can sense another dialectic here, between the recognized order and the generic intrusion into the order of eternity – between the always temporal order – for ideal though it may be, it must also always change – and the truly, “really” timeless role of art itself.

Remember that Eliot’s model of change requires a constant addition. The Ideal Order is, in effect never reached, and yet it always exists. If we return to Paul Cohen’s model of forcing in the presence of the generic set we can find, I believe, a useful comparison. Cohen’s MG model, as described earlier, formalized how an unknown set G could conform to a known set M, and how the process of combination would re-inscribe M with the new information of G, thereby creating MG. But Eliot seems to be suggesting that the order must not merely encode a single new artwork, but infinite artworks in the arc of its process. Not merely MG, but MGHFTV…and so on.
This puts before us a daunting task: the knowledge necessary to make new art consists of a complete knowledge of existing art. This is an impossible (an infinite) task. No single individual could possibly familiarize himself with the entire procession of monuments (even if this is precisely what Pound tried to do himself, and was in fact what he considered to be the very essence of the “modern” writer).

Eliot here does not follow Pound’s literalist approach but instead abstracts it. Such a doctrine of infinite knowledge, Eliot admits, requires “a ridiculous amount of erudition” from a poet before he is even to put pen to paper (52). What is more important than the concrete knowledge of all the important art is the procurement of “consciousness” (52) It is precisely Cohen’s model that can help us visualize this, and through this, each dialectic which has been brought to bear up to this point.

Within Cohen’s G are infinite elements, and the process of codification, in order to be complete, must be assumed to be infinite, for what else other than infinity could be considered complete? Yet if this is the case, the process of counting must take each element in turn in order to force its conformity: an infinite task of infinite length.

If this process could be understood as Eliot’s constant re-ordering, then we could place Art, this great instigator of change, as the unknown G which is forever encoded by, and re-encoding, the infinite-yet-known critical language of M.

Is M, then, a critical discourse, attacking and attacked by the foreign artistic agent G? This is, I believe, a fruitful way in which to frame the question; one which provides us with a graspable model of an infinite progression; yet the proof of Cohen’s model
depends upon *an instantaneous* re-inscription of infinite elements. It is to be assumed that M and G will become MG – the process of inscription is, then, merely a formality.  

This returns us to a scenario in which M is fused to an infinite number of artworks, and each artwork itself is infinite – forever re-inscripting itself and being re-inscripted by other forces. Yet if we follow Badiou’s assertion (following Heidegger) that an artwork is finitude itself – that its very limitedness triggers the infinite - the above approach also fails to ring true. Keeping in mind that it is the finitude of the artwork which makes the infinite possible - that it is the uncompromising presence of the artwork which attests to the infinity of the existence which surrounds it - we come upon an impossible formalization. If infinity, in this model, is the only consideration of the whole which we can achieve, then the existence of infinity must then gesture towards something more.

I suggest we can view the model of MG as itself an artwork, built to draw attention not to itself, but the processes in which it is envisioned and suspended, presenting not itself, but the very conditions of its existence. If this is indeed the case, we can see that Eliot’s dialectical procedure has not solved the problem per se, but only produced another model of it.

It is at this very bedrock upon which Eliot founders. His most coherent formalization of tradition – the concept of the Ideal Order, becomes revealed here as only that: a concept; elegant perhaps, and graspable, even defendable. But it is not enough, for it is not the answer to the question of tradition. In an attempt, through the dialectic, to present the nature of tradition which he has positioned outside of language, Eliot has
created a model that could be understood to be a work of art in itself because its existence ultimately draws more attention to the forces that crafted it than to itself.

This is as close as Eliot seems to be able to bring his critique to the original idea of tradition; he can only explain it in a negating series of dialectical turns: from the outside, that is, instead of the inside. And this is because he’s attempting to discuss something that, due to the very method of his critique, is un-representable; if the essay ended on this note, I believe we could be content with the notion of an ironic Eliot, presenting the failure of the dialectic in the face of a singular absolute. But the essay does not finish here. And this is because Eliot has been circling the very position of his own speaking, each dialectic serving only to draw his own silhouette.

His concept of Ideal Order will not suffice to illuminate the nature of tradition, because for Eliot, there is something about tradition which must escape his ability to define it. All the effort Eliot has contributed to the clear molding of the Ideal Order has finally been only in the service of the creation of little more than an excellent model. It is as though, in the search for the Platonic ideal of a table, Eliot has instead built another table. This is, however, precisely what such a critique is capable of doing (LD 373).

Its failure here is not a question of a faulty method so much as it places Eliot in a critical position which fails to align with his own belief about the nature of the process. As the author of the critical investigation of tradition, he must acknowledge, finally, that tradition is only what he says it is, and the failure of the dialectic to break through this paradox, a paradox which places him in the intolerable position of his own god (or
perhaps better, his own creator) and thereby forever negating his own process of creativity, vacates the dialectic of its usefulness. And so Eliot abandons it completely.

He must abandon it because it does not align with what amounts to little more than his own belief. Creativity does not occur from an ironic remove: “what happens,” he blurts out “is a continual surrender…” (52). Eliot goes on in an even more radical vein: the artist must engage in “self-sacrifice”, must extinguish his own “personality” (53). He must offer a death, in other words. But a death into what? It is here that Eliot’s confession begins to turn back upon itself, because this death can only lead him back into the diaphanous tradition: a death into the land of the dead, which is conversely, immortal. The artist must, then, be willing to die into death in order to be reborn.

This moment is the clear proof to sustain the argument of Habib and others, that what Eliot’s ultimate goal seems to be is a re-inscription of Christian ideology with an aesthetic program. “Tradition” can now finally be pinned and understood to be a pale shadow of the godhead, the artist as sacrificial Christ, and the resurrection of Romantic sensibility practically complete (167).

The confessional tone of this passage becomes even more striking in light of its next movement. As though stunned at this loss of composure in the face of the breakdown of his critical machinery, Eliot abandons this Christian rhetoric immediately, shifting instead to an example which is distinctly Poundian – that is: scientific.

Pound’s praise of the scientific method in the discussion of art was well-known and widely distributed in much earlier essays as a method to purge the more revolting Romantic tendencies from writing and thinking which he believed had invaded aesthetics,
and Eliot reaches for just such a comparison in a moment of critical crisis: the platinum, the sulphur dioxide, the oxygen.

Having presented the best explanation his critical capabilities could muster, the best traditionally philosophical argument, following both the laws and the constraints of the dialectic, Eliot is left only with a model of tradition and not tradition itself. Unable (or perhaps unwilling) to communicate his point negatively (that is, ironically) Eliot has fallen back on shear belief, on witness, on confession. This has committed the disservice, however, of exposing that his idea of a new Modern criticism is a pathetic replica of an abandoned Romanticism, itself a pathetic replica of an abandoned Christianity. Eliot then demonstrates a desire to distance himself from this outburst almost immediately after its expression by reaching out for a Poundian rhetorical mask to carry him to the close of this section, for not only does he mimic Pound in his use of scientific metaphor, but he also mimics Pound in the drastic line break, using juxtaposition for poetic effect; offering a spatial demonstration in lieu of either argument or confession.

After the break, Eliot presents the reader with a shred of “finely filiated” platinum, oxygen and sulphur dioxide, then goes on to famously or infamously explain how, in the resulting chemical reaction “the mind of the poet is the shred of platinum”; so, quite simply, the mind operates – mysteriously - on that which is separate from it, the “man.” What is the man? The “man” consists of his experience, which is suffering, as Eliot notes. This suffering which constitutes experience consists of 1) emotions and 2) feelings. Eliot is quite assertive here (53-4).
It would do us well to point out that Eliot has already executed several dialectical maneuvers in this relatively brief space, although with a great deal less discipline than in the opening pages. He continues with the dialectic process he abandoned at the close of the first section, but what is noticeable is that the rigor necessary for a useful deployment of such a technique is absent here, as though the process continues, absent of its former control. I would suggest that Eliot resumes his dialectic, broken as it is, because it remains the only method left with which Eliot can continue the critique; a Beckett-ian character trundling ever forward on a ruined bicycle.

To begin to draw out the Badiouan implications here: Eliot is left with two choices. Given the parameters of the situation – that is, a critical essay the purpose of which is an investigation of the relationship between tradition and talent – he may either pursue his belief that the truth of that relationship has yet to be encountered from within the confines of the critical situation, or to take a stance outside the situation; that is, outside the critical essay. He has, in fact, already attempted to do this with his quasi-religious-mystical confession. But such a move always results in what is ultimately silence, since it is a position outside of language itself. It is perhaps interesting that Eliot does not stop at his confession if it is indeed representative of what he believes to be the truth, but what is of key importance here is that regardless of the existence of truth, the function of the critical essay is the pursuit of that truth. The mere assertion of truth, here, is unsuitable for the parameters of the situation of the critical essay. And so Eliot continues within those critical confines in an effort to pursue a belief through the framework of the situation, and he does so because what he has knowledge of (the
construction of the dialectical Ideal Order) has yet to align with what he believes (the surrender of the artist).

The only method available to him for such a pursuit is the dialectic, and so it is from the wreckage of his attempts at philosophical abstraction that he encounters, riding the broken wheels of his own critical apparatus, a truth for which he does not search. It is in the interest of aligning knowledge and belief, towards which he aims regardless of the consequence or efficacy of his mode of pursuit that Eliot stumbles upon an answer he had not even considered: the objective correlative. This is only discovered, however, by reaching out from abstract generality into the singularity of his personal experience.

If we examine the preface to the 1928 edition of The Sacred Wood, we can see an echo of this very method when Eliot begins, yet again, to attempt to discuss the nature of poetry. After several characteristically false starts, dialectical moves and finally a reference to personal taste and experience, he concludes with “in these questions, and others which we cannot avoid, we appear already to be leaving the domain of criticism of ‘poetry.’ So we cannot stop at any point. The best we can hope to do is to agree upon a point from which to start” (x). All that really can be done in the criticism of poetry, Eliot is saying, is to agree upon a starting point, and to continue asking questions, and it is on these two basic premises that “Tradition and the Individual Talent” move; the starting point being the discussion of the elements of the title, and the essay itself being the process of questioning. When Eliot resumes his dialectical movements at the beginning
of the second section, he does so because, in order to be faithful to the title of the essay, there is no other choice.

It is at this moment that Eliot becomes an active subject of the essay itself; that Eliot disappears into the text. He is no longer the ironic, distanced observer, nor is he the repentant confessor. He is at this moment ignorant of the outcome and committed to the process in the pursuit of a truth in which he can, at the moment, only believe. The essay moves for a handful of pages here, absent of deception, irony or even guilt as Eliot pushes the critical machinery forward, boldly allowing the record of the text to show his progress.

Jameson notes that the dialectic can show, in its multiple deployments, the negative outline of the truth it approaches. But it is the very process of formalization that ultimately defeats the dialectic, since it fails to offer a positive manifestation of the singularity. Such a thing cannot be, according to Jameson, addressed in the abstract. It can only be spoken of in the particular (388).

As to what a singularity is, precisely, Jameson references Lacan’s notion of the *sinthome* as the best formalization of the singular conclusion of the dialectic, particularly in reference to Lacan’s formulation of 3 separate registers of human experience occurring at once in time (383). Each register, (imaginary, symbolic, real), Jameson believes could be understood as differing dialectics; meaning that information which is processed in the imaginary register is relatable only from the symbolic register, and vice-versa (387). This is the reason behind so much of what has been taken to be Lacan’s linguistic
obfuscation concerning his own apparatus: the whole simply cannot be seen in total, only piece by piece (otherwise, and this problem echoes the problem of Eliot’s essay as a whole, the “whole” becomes merely a model of another, now removed, truth). But with the band of the sinthome, one can traverse – and as a result experience in total – the entirety of the apparatus. Such a sinthome is fashioned, Jameson suggests, from bits of the present-yet-lost Real experience, stitched together as an allegory, as a story, as a particular.

As Lacan examines James Joyce in Seminar XXIII, he notes the sinthome is fashioned through an artistically creative process, established as a stand-in for the organizing principle of the Name of the Father, the position of which had been, for Joyce, abandoned (XXIII 40). If the symptomatic processes of the symbolic, threatened with a submersion into the nonsensical chaos of the real, are capable of fashioning a new organizing principle from the accumulated detritus they increasingly encounter in the slide towards the real, I would suggest that just such a process occurs in this essay: once the organizing principle of the dialectic – here as traditional critical enquiry – has reached a point of crisis in its uncovering of Eliot’s latent Christianity, it is then Pound (an excellent stand in for an anti-Christ), towards which Eliot lashes his dialectic in a plunge into the real abyss of his own mind, driven in this process by nothing more than a belief and an acceptance of the responsibility to locate it critically. Eliot is willing, in other words, to tear down his own foundations in the interest of pursuing his belief.

Furthermore, it is this faith in the process of critical enquiry (the dialectic) even in the face of evidence to the contrary, that enables Eliot to cobble together a sinthomatic
Poundian machine built of scientific metaphor and poetic juxtaposition to drive into his own mind and confront the singularity in the only guise it can wear – that of the particular.

To trace out this process in the text, we have the scientific example, in which two materials synthesize into one due to the presence of a transcendental third: the platinum. Secondly, we have the mind of the poet as separate from the experience of the man, which both combine in order to form, ostensibly (it seems to be assumed), poetry. Finally at bottom we have “experience,” which consists of emotions and feelings. Eliot has now conflated the poet, the mind and the platinum on one hand; and the man, suffering, experience and chemical gases on the other.

Unconcerned with an elucidation of his various levels of comparison here, Eliot moves quickly on with a tone that verges on desperation: the constant deployment of “may be” to hedge his declarations, the use of “or” to allow a contradiction of his statement to stand concurrently (54). “Emotions” and “feelings,” while existing on the same plane of comparison earlier are now elucidated in their difference, to varying effect. He retreats to the “effect” of art to examine “emotion,” but as for the creation of art itself Eliot focuses instead on “feeling”; for it seems that while great poetry can be made without emotion it can’t be made without feeling. Emotion is presented here as a kind of meta-feeling (54).

And yet, in examining his examples of “feeling” in poetry, Eliot deprives even “feeling” of poetic power, since what is really in need is an “image” in suspension in the
poet’s mind (55). The mind/poet/platinum is now referred to as a “receptacle” for the
storing of “numberless feelings, phrases, images” (55). Besides the fact that Eliot has
moved the “catalyst” for the creation of poetry from “platinum” to “mind” to “man” to
“feeling,” we should note here the conflation that occurs between what a feeling was – on
par with emotion, one of the two constitutive elements of suffering – to what it is now
one in a list of things which the mind stores, waiting for…what exactly?

What this escalating confusion has produced, besides the total destruction of the
dialectic itself, is the emphasis which Eliot now places on the \textit{image}. And it is here at the
end of the dialectic that we have a rash of proper names. Bereft of abstract models, Eliot
has entered into the Ideal Order of his own mind, his own real store of fragments – of
Shakespeare, of Dante, of Homer. He begins to list examples: “the episode of Paolo and
Francesca,” the voyage of Ulysses, the murder of Agamemnon (55).

And yet even these examples are too unwieldy; they are a series of arranged
moments, periods of artistic time. They are too large to be the trigger, the catalyst, the
image; they are the echoes thereof, the new world already made. They are not a singular
event, but a new art entire. And “the difference” he writes, “between the art and the event
is always absolute” (56). The event cannot be a play, a scene, a poem, but only one, hard,
small, image of maximum intensity and Eliot pulls, finally, a single word form the
wreckage: nightingale.

This is, I believe, the “unsummoned image” to which O’Hara makes reference but
never identifies (118). The nightingale is an image which blooms, not through a direct
willing of it, but due to the tireless searching of Eliot himself, immersed in the process of
the text. It is the Thing which will stand as the event (and of course it must always be a
Thing, the event itself impossible to locate - Eliot’s struggles in the identification of its
locality serve here as proof). Its repercussions will be his truth: his enunciation of the
concept of objective correlative.

Eliot’s perpetual movement from one comparison, from one metaphor to another,
is due to the successive unsuitability of each for his purpose of describing something
essentially indescribable. Keats’s nightingale. Eliot holds up the word as though it’s
supposed to explain something.

It is only with his invocation of the nightingale that Eliot’s tortuous prose comes
to rest and Eliot seems to regain control of the text. His control is signaled by a return of
an ironic stance. He admits to the struggles of the piece and then provides a mysterious
poetic passage devoid of citation or explanation. And it is then that he then begins to
attempt to explain what it is that such a thing as a “nightingale” could do in a poem; the
germination of the concept of objective correlative (58). But this idea, this truth fought
for here and won, is a formalization of the event that occurred in the text itself. In Eliot’s
later work the idea of the objective correlative will come to its full fruition, and the path
of “Tradition and the Individual Talent” seems to have been, after all, in the interest of
the discovery of this new concept.

In the text itself can be traced the process of enquiry inaugurated by an external
event and driven by the fidelity to the truth of said event. This process of enquiry
remains true to the event by continuing to pursue the goal of the critical expression of
artistic surrender. Such a goal is, for Eliot, completely unattainable, as he believes such a
description will forever fail to be comprehensive, most importantly because such a
description is only made available to the totalitarian subjectivity of the author as
transcendent from the text itself. Eliot refuses to occupy such a critical position due a
fidelity to his belief of surrender, yet he also refuses to leave the major point of the essay
unanswered. Utilizing the generic critical tool of the dialectic, Eliot tries and succeeds in
crafting an equally generic model of the situation, but this model will not suffice because
it drives Eliot into this position of complete authority. The dialectic, proven as it has
been to provide nothing more than generic models – representations – is therefore
unsuited to Eliot’s belief in surrender. Yet neither is surrender in the text itself suitable,
since it occurs within a critical essay and is, as such, nonsensical. Eliot nevertheless
pushes forward, remaining faithful to his personal belief and dutiful to his critical
responsibility, operating the dialectic on increasingly abstract terms until he is left with
his own personal examples. From these examples emerges the image of the nightingale;
this image is not, precisely, what Eliot intended to find. It is not a critical expression of
artistic surrender; it is instead a concrete example of the word-as-image, rooted in his
own personal experience. What this provides him – and this is why, finally, such a
process of enquiry is effective – is an original critical concept. If “nightingale” is the
event of “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” then “objective correlative” would be its
truth. As a critical term it is relevant, it is functional, and it inaugurates an entirely new
field of literary investigation. It is a “really new” contribution.

What is most remarkable to me about this essay is Eliot’s willingness to risk its
focus, its consistency – its entire being – in his unrelenting pursuit of an unreachable
goal. Because of this risk the essay does not represent the critical process (that would be this essay) but presents it in the movement of the language itself and stands as a coherent example of a successful enquiry into knowledge in the interest of truth.
5.1 The Dilemma Dramatized

Badiou often opens his critiques of modern liberal democracy by locating a deep apathy at work in the nations of America and Western Europe. It is an apathy born, he believes, out of a deep and fundamental disconnect that the governing powers of western civilization engender in the very people they govern. An individual voice has no place in a representative democracy, just as an individual’s desire has no firm foothold in the swiftly moving river of capital which acts as the engine of an ever-expanding and fundamentally faceless powerstructure organized to alienate the individual from the very forces which inevitably govern his or her fate. The natural course for such an apathy is to rise to a much more dangerous and ultimately destructive nihilism, out of which in turn has been born time and again the totalitarian disasters of so many attempts at reform (C 31-2).

The embrace of totalitarianism is a natural response, Badiou believes, to the horror that accompanies the realization that the promises of freedom that liberal democracy offers its subjects are merely illusions (32). Not only does such horror become a rage which feeds the desire for revolt, but the form that revolt against liberal democracy so often takes is that of a cult-like revolutionary movement which demands the passionate submission of its adherents. Yet isn’t this real and violent passion preferable to the illusory capitalistic daze that accompanies liberal democracy? Those
who answer this question in the affirmative, as many have in the past century, open the
door for the blossoming of true terror, since the demand of such movements - while
deeply personal -is nevertheless insatiable and the whims of the Movement, the Party or
the Leader often bend ever closer to the purification of its ranks only possible through a
great purge.

This is the choice modernity, and by extension post-modernity, has left the
individual: a safe existence without meaning or a full existence of terror. It is up to
philosophy to think past this very impasse by thinking through it: by locating the
conditions which fashioned it and tracing the arc of their progression, because it is only
through a reconsideration of these conditions that we may locate a solution.

Poetry in particular is uniquely poised to assist in such a procedure, since it is in
poetic language where the truth is nominated as immanent and free of support, and
therefore it is in poetry where the voice of the new is most often heard. Badiou seems to
treat poetic art as the most flexible of philosophy’s conditions (as opposed to, say,
science) and its ability to declare without support is both its greatest strength and
weakness. This weakness and strength derive from poetry’s seeming weightlessness
within an established situation. The relevance of a poem to a society appears negligible
and this lack of immediate relevance lends the poem its superior flexibility. It is in
poetry more so than the other conditions that truth can be declared and explored with the
slightest consequences, and it is therefore in poetry that the voice of the new is most often
first heard.
The Waste Land has stood for almost a century as the preeminent modern poem, all the more so because it dramatizes the modern dilemma in striking and desperate fashion. From the title onward the poem presents the barren stage upon which an actor must come forth to inaugurate the action, but no actor will hold the stage, and no action proposed comes to its completion. The empty place is absent of a master; the apathy and nihilism bred by confusion and anger disallows any decision, even the decision to submit to terror. The poem dramatizes a quest, certainly, but a quest for what? For meaning? For safety? For God?

The Waste Land proper begins and ends in an unstable setting, its statements stand without ownership; it is in this way that the poem both refuses the strong hand of a tyrannical Master as well as the illusory safety of a stable place. The poem’s greatness lies in the execution of this double-denial, rigorously disallowing any possibility of its own resolution and thereby inaugurating modernism in English literature. I suggest that in order to understand the place of this poem within what we term the modern dilemma we must look not merely at what it is but what it is not, as well as what it could have been. It is in this spirit that I investigate the motives of the two principle authors of the text, Pound and Eliot, principally through the manuscript on which they both labored, in order to clearly understand how and why these questions of power and place were so willfully disregarded.

Following Lyndall Gordon from “The Waste Land Manuscript,” I believe that Eliot’s intentions for the poem were drastically different from what Pound believed the poem could be; that Eliot’s inner turmoil served as the raw data for Pound’s rigorous
editing process; that both Pound’s and Eliot’s visions were greatly at odds (Pound’s finally proving out) and finally; that Pound prevented Eliot from crafting a more coherent finale for the arc of the poem in the interest of preserving the poem’s strength and profundity.

Of all modern theorists of the day, Pound was well aware of the modern dilemma *The Waste Land* presents and perhaps for the first time enunciates to the English-speaking world. I believe he was also aware of the shape that a possible solution to such dilemma would finally take. In a fine Salieri-like irony, Pound could detect the failings of a superior poet such as Eliot but was himself incapable of rectifying them in any sort of accessible art. And yet in his essays of the period, particularly “The Chinese Character as Medium for Poetry” we see him gesturing towards a resolution of the dilemma in ways strikingly similar to Badiou’s own formulations of an infinite subjectivity. This resolution suggests the role of a totalitarian master has always been a ruse and that the supposed relativity associated with the infinite possibilities of position to be tied to such a ruse. The totalitarian subject and the infinite object is the false dichotomy which represents the modern dilemma, and it is finally language, Pound believes, which has brought us to this confusion of subjectivity and objectivity. The solution for Pound should be not one or the other, nor even some synthesis of the two, but an expression of the desire - or perhaps better the will - to unite the two: a clean and unobscured metaphor, a poetry so natural as to not be poetry at all, but symbols of expressive relation.

5.2 Modern Dialectic: Yeats and Woolf
Badiou writes that the core problem of modernity emerges when we confront the fact that the truth remains captive to the figure of the master (HA 51). This means that truth cannot be split or divided from the master-figure; the truth requires such a figure in order to come to pass. The subject is then forced to understand the master as an omnipotent Other either as existing currently or as having existed at some point in the past.

If the notion of truth must always pass through a lost master then truth must lie perpetually in the un-payable debt of this primal figure who has either been sacrificed (or better, sacrificed himself) for the good of the present-day subject. If the master is, however, not gone but present, we are presented with an even more problematic situation in which any concept of truth decays into nothing more than an echo of the position of mastery. In either situation the category of truth becomes devalued to the point of irrelevancy, since it becomes impossible to posit a “truth” which would hold independent of a particular subject’s bond to its masterful Other. It becomes impossible to nominate a truth worthy of the title.

To consider the modern dilemma as Badiouformulates it is to imagine how the intersection of technology and capital accelerated a collapse of cultural grand narratives to the point at which a latent nihilism became manifest across society by the conclusion of the first world war (C 30). The best of the modern artists however, are identifiable by
their rejection of avant-garde projects of mere destruction. These artists tasked themselves with the composition of a new model from which to proceed (94).

Yet these projects are so often on a much smaller scale than the elaborate, if fatally flawed, lynchpins of society which had previously fallen. The moderns reinvented on a subjective scale the world they believed they had lost and they did this in order to fashion a comprehensible mythos which retained the power of explanation without succumbing to the alienating falsehoods of God and County.

The modern writer attempted to rebuild a personal world in the pattern of the lost communal society, and in the examples of WB Yeats and Virginia Woolf, we see two dramatically different manifestations of this urge.

Yeats constructed a coherent system of symbolic rites based on his belief in a spirit world which operated parallel to our own and which intersected at times with spectacular results. From this system he drew not only the power for his poetry and drama, but by some accounts (that of Maddox, for example) this spiritualism offered the truth of his own daily existence. Such a system allowed him to construct, in the barren place left by the dissipation of the melancholic Celtic Twilight, a tower and a stair through which the poet was able to make truth immanent. Yeats’s spiritual philosophy allowed him to construct an apparatus through which truth could be accessed and consequently lived; a truth which was entirely terrestrial. “Truth” for Yeats is

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10 I follow here the argument Badiou puts forward in *Century* where he dismisses the avant-garde of the early 20th century, (Dadaists in particular) due to their inability to formulate a clear Heideggerian/Marxist project – that is, to dismantle meaning while erecting a political edifice. Such a position as Badiou’s here naturally discounts the value of destruction which he has at times, (*Theory of the Subject*) advocated, but I believe his larger aim is to axiomatically deprive nihilism of any force or power.
consequently something he can touch (a sword, a sculpture of lapis lazuli) and due to his 
direct access to this truth he is able to utilize its power in artistic expression.

The drawback to such a situation is that this truth of Yeats is determined by, 
supported by, little more than his own inclination: truth is determined by the inclination 
of the Other that he has assigned, and in the process of depending completely upon such 
an Other Yeats necessarily risks his own total enslavement. To love and want the truth, 
here, boils down to loving and wanting the Other. The argument can be made, (and has 
been again by Maddox) that loving and wanting the Other is what Yeats had been doing 
for decades, through his obsessions and idealizations of various women. His wife George 
with her automatic writing, finally becomes, not the unattainable Other, but the very 
gateway to it, the flesh and blood incarnation of the spirits themselves.

To externalize one's own conscience through a process of erotic transference has 
the advantage of bringing the joy and horror of one's own personal truth into the everyday 
life-as-lived, but as such it distances any real interaction between the subject and 
anything beside its Other. It is a psychoanalytic relationship writ large across existence, 
eliminating any gesture towards an imaginary reality and stamping out any ethical 
imperative other than personal satisfaction as recognized through the fulfillment of the 
Other’s demand. The difference here between Mother Theresa and the Son of Sam 
becomes negligible.

To follow the example of Woolf, on the other hand, is to willfully disjoin truth 
from a master. Woolf refuses to deposit, in the visage of a particular Other, the power of 
her own controlling interest. As she demonstrates in *To the Lighthouse*, there are forces
at work much larger than those of mere personality. Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay, characters tailor-made to dominate proceedings with the sheer force of their personalities, are systematically dismantled by time until the final pages of the novel determine them to be mere placeholders in a larger and much more ancient drama: the deeper structure of grammar and familial relation that trumps the seemingly divine and terrible power of the individual spirit. It is to these greater and ultimately empty positions that an understanding of reality must adhere, and it is the function of artistic understanding which is the preeminent human power that allows us to recognize the truth of the structure in which Mr. Ramsey moves from tyrant to father in a moment. Such an understanding also enables the Lighthouse to move from a Yeatsian talisman to occupy – at one and the same time - the role of a building on a rock in the bay. Such a separation of truth and mastery frees the subject from the tyranny of an Other and allows instead for a sensible exploration of the ultimately faceless apparatus of power.

“Truth” here is open to those artistically gifted enough in the process of metaphor to grasp its very movement, and as such this truth is anonymous, but it also seems bound to rules of movement alien to the human mind that would hope to access it. Those who do grasp the fact of its movement may only do so, as Lily Briscoe does, through the insight offered by her art or, as James does, through an intuitive realization of the falsity of his own previously held impressions. Such a truth, rooted in the epiphany of metaphor, hardly seems to belong to the characters that experience it.

Further, the truth Woolf offers here is one totally dependent on the Ramsays themselves: they are Masters who have sacrificed, or been made to sacrifice, their
position of mastery for the sake of the subject’s understanding that mastery is merely a position in the stream of positions. This is an insight impossible without first the abandonment of this position by the Ramsays themselves, and consequently the characters who grasp this truth will always lie in the Ramsays’ debt and can then never be completely separated from them; much like Freud’s primal father, all the more present for his absence.

While the effect of Yeats's Master is ever-present and the truth of its pleasure and displeasure register concurrently with Yeats's own, the benign intentions of Woolf's arbiter of truth must be taken on faith alone, as the nature of the engine which powers its subject through its arc remains completely unknown. While Yeats seeks and gains the approval of his Master, Woolf’s truth is a submission to a God that never answers, and as such offers something perhaps a little worse than the absence of freedom: the illusion of freedom. Such a freedom is essentially the sacrifice of both time and space to a transcendent power which, while perhaps allowing understanding, will never offer joy.

I read To the Lighthouse here as a precursor to early Lacanian structuralism, in which the “truth” of a situation (of Irma’s dream, for example, in which its tri-partite nature is emphasized) is its very shape (E 621-6). Understood this way, whatever fashions such shapes (the unconscious, for early Lacan) operates with a system of logic foreign to man, yet in the movement of this logic resides our notion of truth, and therefore our governing principles. To joyfully embrace this reality, as Briscoe does, is to put trust in a system outside of and indifferent to our control; an alien movement of
thought which, due to our sporadic and intuitive access to it, qualifies as a truth based on little more than its indifferent existence outside of the meaning of everyday life.

To read these choices of modernism politically, as Badiou does throughout his book *Century*, we are left then with the totalitarianism of the horrific Master and the assumedly democratic operations of a system (in the guise of a *market*) which we can observe and intuit but in which we can never effectively participate: that is, change. It is this ability to perceive coupled with the inability to affect that spawns the despondency of the liberal democratic subject.

Our options as modern subjects are then to, as Woolf does, separate truth and mastery, thereby opening up a transcendent space in which we sacrifice our desire to love our god to a system independent of our own reality, aiming our lives towards the personal extinction in which we will finally fuse with the structure - a blatantly Christian paradigm re-imagined in the logics of liberal democracy. This becomes manifested as a consumerism without satisfaction, a republic without consequence, an existence without explanation.

On the other hand we may, as Yeats does, find truth and love in our own lifetime, but only based on the acceptance of slavery to a palpable master, the whims of whom we must, in order to maintain contact to our truth, obey without question.

The problem of modernity lies in the fact that these are no choices at all. Badiou invites us, then, to retrace our steps in order to locate, precisely, when these two false choices were afforded us. If we are able to locate the moment that these twin edifices
were constructed we can begin to ask why such a construction began in the first place.
But to do this, we must return, as Badiou never fails to invite us to do, to the place, the
bare stage, the empty scene. We must return to the waste land.

5.3 The Poem and the Plan

*The Waste Land* has come to mean so many things. The passage of its reception
alone is singular for a poem of any century, but its persistent deconstruction by its readers
(a two-folded deconstruction, the poem itself a deconstruction), secures its position as the
20th century poem. The rise and fall of critical disciplines throughout the century can be
traced in a record of the poem’s reception, from confusion to consecration to a
condemnation all the more dependent for its effect on the inviolability of its object. As
an instigator in the birth of particular modes of reading, the text remains to a very real
extent resistant to those modes. But to consult the initial reviews of the text is to
encounter a brand of critique somewhat more holistic than those currently in fashion. In
1922, the poem is, interestingly, derided for its lack of connective tissue, its confusion of
voices and its unremittingly bleak view of modern humanity:

The thing is a mad medley. It has a plan, because the author says so; and
presumably it has some meaning, because he speaks of its symbolism; but
meaning, plan, and the intention alike are massed behind a smokescreen of
anthropological and literary erudition, and only the pundit, pedant, or the
clairvoyant will be in the least aware of them…

(Powell 15)
This response recalls Ellman’s more recent critique of the poem as a “sphinx without a secret” and indeed such critiques of the poem today are considered bold and provocative, since what is generally considered to be the ultimate success of the poem is its enunciation (in a case made first by Richards), of just such a disconnection which was emblematic for a generation of readers.

And yet in another review of the period we read:

“…the Waste Land” says something which is not new: that life has become barren and sterile, that man is withering, impotent and without assurance that the waters which made the land fruitful will ever rise again…

(Seldes 16)

This response in particular is perhaps all the more striking since the fear and desperation of The Waste Land - the very desperation which has been plastered over an entire consideration of 20th century literature as inescapably modern - is labeled here by the very establishment press it sought to overthrow as “not new.” And if it is indeed the case that the sentiment “life has become barren” is not new (as even the simplest of sober reflections on history and literature must allow) then we are left with the question as to why this poem came to emblemize an entire movement?

The short answer – and I follow Richards’s argument here - is that the desperation already prevalent certainly in that time as it is in any rose with the youth who came of age in a time of an increasing sense of disconnectedness from land, from culture, from society due to the increasing forces of technology and capitalization and its accompanying alienation. As such, the predominant mood of the youth was a tragic one, a lost one, a
deeply serious – if not altogether nihilistic – tone which seemed to demand that the established society be forced to recognize the essential horror of what life had presumably become.  

The establishment (and by “establishment” I mean the literary papers of record which bedeviled Pound and Eliot; the *Times*, for example) had come of age in a time of optimism and a time of hope; a time of rising patriotic pride in the advancement of technology and the increase of capital. This optimism was connected to a world the moderns could not recognize however, because it had already vanished, and the world that had arisen in its place was one which was all-too-eager for the dire pronouncements made by Eliot’s poem.

Lentricchia has gone so far as to demonstrate with Eliot’s own biography this very disconnection: namely Eliot’s job at Lloyd’s, which afforded him little time for poetry. Eliot’s very particular kind of poetry was one that had little chance (it seemed) of gaining mainstream, Tennyson-like acceptance; it was a very avant garde, worth-less project, which while being a profound expression of Eliot’s own inner life, was radically distanced from his everyday reality, and was *built to be so* since everyday “reality” denied Eliot the possibility of any spiritual existence at all (251). The writing, then, must be of the most activist poetry imaginable with little hope of wide distribution, and must be executed in private moments of fervor, of surrender; a surrender only possible for Eliot, at this point, in the creative act.

Any kind of expression – even one as full of despair and confusion as *The Waste Land* - must still be rooted in a plan. Even the Dadaists had an agenda, and a polemical one at that. Lentricchia notes that as Eliot was heavily influenced by the mythic structure of Joyce’s *Ulysses*, in which ancient narrative arcs are utilized to illustrate a much more modern dilemma, Eliot took as the framework for his poem of disillusion the quest-romance (264). This framework, this Plan, has been elevated by many critics ever since its publication to be the whole of the poem, its “purpose,” and its redeeming feature.

The Plan has become more important than the poem itself, more influential, more known; we might go so far as to say “more read.” It was first clearly enunciated by Eliot himself in the accompanying “Notes” and thereafter elevated by the New Critics to become a model of reading in itself. Such a Plan, as Lentricchia writes, now dominates discussion of the poem:

> For all those so armed with special decoding devices, the poem, beginning (obviously now with its title), becomes a radiant series of organic fragments, survivals or traces, in a minor key, of ancient ritual and deep persistent myth…an ironic quest-romance, filtered through the modernist aesthetic of college whose effect is to deny narrative progression and change and to insist on a nightmare of temporal simultaneity.

(Lentricchia 268)

It takes little imagination to find the appeal of the Plan as a pedagogical tool because it is dangerous to assert that *The Waste Land* is an ideal representation of great 20th century literature. Could it be that his poem, which plumbs new depths of fear and loathing, is the great achievement of American poetics? How difficult it must be to confront the emotional core of the poem, present that core to a full room of expectant
students, perhaps even optimistic (certainly an idealization of such a room), ready to sink their teeth into great literature. Would it not be better to pawn them off onto research into the Italian and task them with nailing down the Shakespeare allusions? A tarot pack would be an excellent prop, or rather distraction; in the Notes Eliot himself professes to be unfamiliar with the actual contents of the pack (SP 68). It would be beneficial to read 900 pages of Frazer to understand what Stetson has in his back yard and why he has it, but Frazer offers no answer as to why it will never spout; and even if it did, what would that possibly mean to a world in which the third that walks with you goes forever unrecognized?

The infatuation with the Plan was built around the idea that, in order to enjoy the poem, one must know all its references. One must know the Frazer and the Weston, certainly, but also the Dante, the Shakespeare, the Bible, the Marvell; but the quest to know these things independently ignores the poem altogether. The Plan is unified, the poem is multi-vocal. To present a poem as the answer to an un-posed question is a destructive method of criticism as no poem is independently unified, and certainly not The Waste Land. My point is that regardless of essays to the contrary, I don’t believe that Tiresias could be understood to speak The Waste Land. Pound didn’t seem to think so, and Pound helped to write it (WL MS 47).

But around this poem coalesced the “modernist” sensibility, for better and for worse, and it is in this poem, if we look at its overarching concerns: the abandoned place, the search for truth, the silent master; we can find the microcosm of the dilemma not only of Woolf and of Yeats but the dilemma of our current ethical political reality engendered
by an acceptance of tragic finitude. It is the supposition of finitude by the modern subject which then confronts it with the tragic choice of whether to accept love without proof, or proof without love.

Returning to this primal scene of the modernist movement, we are faced with the assumptions and drives of the two distinct personalities of Eliot and Pound, and it is through an investigation of their assumptions and drives, of their understandings of the situation of the poem, of their motivations – their own arcs of truth - that we may begin to unravel their twinned notions of the world, and then perhaps begin to work our way out of the choice revealed to us by the poem.

5.4 A Coherent Incoherence

In his dissection of this false choice Badiou often turns to Mallarmé, particularly his *Coup de Dés*, in which a ghost ship is lost beneath the waves of an empty sea. In Badiou’s reading, the figure of a captain dominates the poem, ever poised to throw the dice that will decide his fate. In this pause before a throw of the dice, Badiou identifies Mallarmé’s refusal to allow the figure of the master, in the guise of the captain, to decide truth through his own action: a refusal, therefore, to impose his will on the world (HA 54). Such a refusal is notable because without it, the *place* of the empty sea, if not the setting of the poem itself, is doomed to once more be determined by whatever the captain believes should determine it; a tyranny of the will.
The captain’s ship is sunk and the time of his omnipotent will is past; yet his decision not to throw remains a decision, even if it is one of self-negation. Even as the captain fades in the poem – dies in “life” – he is re-imagined in the vault of stars as the frozen constellation of the bear. Though absent, his image looms, and in the very number of stars lies the answer to the riddle of his fate. The poem achieves its truth – this number – only through the captain’s decision to sacrifice himself for it; to sacrifice himself to the poetic process of the language of the poem itself. So the captain refuses love without proof, but leaves us with proof without love – the stars stretched across a space of sky that is cold, distant and purged of meaning; yet still existent, due to the very presence of the stars themselves.\textsuperscript{12}

*The Waste Land* provides neither a master as firm as the captain nor a space as consistent as a sea or sky. The poem dramatizes a master speaking in a space, but both of these are perpetually in flux; a flux which is not a throw of the dice because it concludes with no stable solution. There is a desire for an answer but there is no answer given, and while the Plan hopes to provide a framework for the question and does indeed deign to deliver an answer, it is an answer Pound refuses to allow.

Eliot’s drive is to poetically dramatize this Plan with veiled particulars of his own biography – to fulfill a structure with the raw material of his own emotional reality. Pound is more concerned with the health and function of art in general: he knows what the poem must and should do in the broader scheme of modern poetry; further, he knows

\textsuperscript{12} My reading here again uncritically follows that of Badiou in “A Modern Dialectic” from *Handbook of Inaesthetics.*
how this is to be accomplished: through a purging of the personal drama Eliot constantly
seeks to instill in it.

Eliot possesses the raw material for poetry: a tumultuous inner life seemingly
absent in Pound (who fought all his battles in full and public view); while Pound
possesses the proper understanding of what a modern poem is supposed to be. While
Eliot is concerned more with a dramatization of what we could call a personal truth – a
spiritual death and reawakening, Pound is pre-eminently concerned with artistic truth –
with a sound poem, and it is Pound who denies the easy solution Eliot desires. This
constant denial is, however, evident in Eliot’s earliest drafts and emphasized in Pound’s
editorial decisions. It is the poem’s greatest strength and the reason for its impact upon a
society who had yet to hear concisely the problems of the modern world so enunciated.

The power of this poem is its danger. It could be understood to speak the truth of
modernism in that it enunciates the fears of 1922, and yet it remains substantial and
affecting today and here lies the danger of the poem because if we can understand it to
have inaugurated the situation of modernism in English literature, such a situation has
since reached its own saturation in post-modernism. The poem is no longer the truth,
although it was at one time. The truth of a new situation will then be visible when we
recognize how - and why - *The Waste Land* is no longer the truth, but a simulacrum
thereof.

*The Waste Land* has not one place but several: the desert, brown London fogs, the
dense banality of a fortune-teller’s chamber, a drawing room, a noisy bar; the invocation
(I hesitate to say “place”) of a sloshing sea, then the desert again, a dry plain; all this until the place itself stumbles upon its own words, the words becoming the only place, themselves cracking and breaking any idea of place (“London bridge is falling down”) into nonsense.

The voices are so many as to almost defy listing, and they are quite different from the characters; while Spenser and Shakespeare and Dante make appearances in the form of raw text itself these are not characters, not masters; and then the very characters themselves – the hyacinth girl, the young man carbuncular, Madam Sosostris - are introduced and manipulated by another narrative hand altogether. There seems to be the operations of a voice, but where it comes from, where it stands and even what it wants to say, is incoherent.

This incoherence, this splintering, is not Pound’s invention but is representative of his editorial rigor. Eliot himself locates the tone; Pound helps him to maintain it. The first page of the manuscript is a long narrative scene of drunken youths stumbling around a nighttime London, which Eliot cuts completely in subsequent drafts. The next page begins with the familiar “April is the cruelest month…” and continues in at least three separate voices. This sense of disembodiment Eliot presents in the first pages by cutting the narrative scene and retaining the jumble of the mountains and the hyacinth girl and the “red rock,” is the very essence of the poem which Pound struggles to maintain throughout the manuscript against Eliot’s propensity to lapse into ironic bourgeois set pieces reminiscent of the cut first page.
If we are to locate Pound’s vision of the poem (a vision we can contrast most starkly to Eliot’s) it is that Pound takes these initial stanzas and begins to insist on a poem which is a world itself, and not a poem about a world. He accomplishes this by repeatedly eliminating the object addressed. For example, the direct attack on the city of London which Eliot writes on pg. 31 of the manuscript, the repeated: “London, the swarming life you kill and breed…London, your people is bound upon the wheel”; this Pound strikes through completely, almost four stanzas total, and he does so because this passage is a direct address to London; an emotional address certainly, but worse, one which focuses too intently on a single location. Pound cuts these passages not once but twice, as Eliot holds on to it in further revisions. “Vocative” Pound writes twice on the manuscript, voicing his dismay over the direct address of the poem’s voice to a particular object (43). Further on in the section:

Unreal City [this Pound allows]
I have seen and see [Pound circles this due to “I’”]
as well as Under the brown fog of your winter noon [“your” he cuts]

(WL MS 43)

Pound’s paramount concern, as becomes more evident in the later pages of the manuscript, is not with the nomination of a setting-as-such, so much as it is the preoccupation with a particular setting to the point at which it overwhelms the speaker. In Pound’s vision, the poet is outside of the city, moving forces within it; in Eliot’s vision, the poet is consumed by the city, railing against it.
Pound aggressively cuts the most coherent scenes, eliminating any continuity in
the interest of the more interesting sequence of words. He attacks the first long setting of
“A Game of Chess,” finally allowing it as only the nouns and verbs of pure description.
For example, he disallows “inviolable” as a descriptor of “voice”; he disallows “spread
out in little fiery points of will” – cutting “little” and “of will” – and finally suggests the
entire section is “dogmatic deduction but wobbly as well” (11). A single example to
illustrate his larger aim: “from which one tender Cupidon peeped out”: “one” is changed
to “a” (11).

What is the difference between “one” and “a”? The difference lies in specificity:
if the Cupidon is “one” then it is separate from others; it is unique, notable, memorable,
special, specific, central; it becomes an object strong enough to capture the speaker and a
strong object denotes a stable world – an objective world - itself separate from the
speaker. Such a world in which the speaker can locate himself is one from which he can
then dislocate himself safely, that is, ironically. But Pound allows nothing to take full
shape, thereby disallowing the safe retreat into irony Eliot attempts so often to re-instate.
The disruption of stability and safety is a guiding principle for Pound, creating a
coherently incoherent total.

Pound takes the section “Death by Water” originally a four page, ten stanza piece,
and cuts it by at least two-thirds. While critical of the overall section, Pound does not
advocate the near-complete cut that Eliot finally executes, but the impact of Pound’s
overall displeasure with it is, I believe, evident in Eliot’s cut. On his copy of “Death by
Water” Pound writes: “Bad – but can’t attack until I get typescript” (55). It is the
“attack,” which denotes the attitude of so much of Pound’s work on this poem; an active, if not outright aggressive approach to the prone text, one which connotes violence and one which helps establish his own sense of ownership, or at least his level of comfort, with the text as a whole.

The first two stanzas of “Death by Water” in the manuscript run as follows:

In the first line Pound cuts “attentive to the chart and to the sheets,” the cut indicative of his distaste for a strong character or character building; names, he allows, as flat icons, but solid figures and characterization, he does not.

The next line he cuts altogether, “concentrated will,” as it provides no image, and “the tempest and the tide” which conveys nothing substantial other than cliché, sacrificed at the altar of rhythm.

Yet Pound is sensitive to rhythm, asking in the next line for “retains” to be moved to the end of the line and “even” to be cut. I am tempted to add that Pound allows the phrase “public bars and streets” which, while flirting with the same level of inconsequentiality and indecisiveness (is it a bar or a street?) as “tempest and the tide,”
still uses words more firmly descriptive of an experiential reality, and a hard reality at that (Pound’s preoccupation with “hardness” in language could barely be overemphasized).

For the final line he cuts “clean and,” taking an interesting line and elevating it to the mythic by eliminating any bodily physicality that “clean” would denote.

In the next stanza, the ruffian need not be “drunk”; again it’s a choice of one-or-the-other, and “drunken” suffices. “Stairs” need not be both “illicit” and “backstreet.” “Illicit stairs” is far more poetic than “backstreet stairs” which is merely descriptive, and here is a perfect example of the poetic in Pound, who would seem to simply advocate plain speech; poetic speech is nothing of the sort. The poetic is, for Pound, the perfect juxtaposition between commonplace words; “backstreet stairs” is obvious, doing no work; “illicit stairs” infers “backstreet” in a way in which “backstreet” does not necessarily infer “illicit.” A degree of the sinister seems to be at stake in this moment, and “illicit stairs” maintains an air of secrecy. These are stairs leading from a dark place to a dark place: stairs from a basement, stairs to a guarded room, stairs leading somewhere where they should not lead.

This is how Pound’s editorial hand – one that first recognizes the necessity of choice in the phrase and one that secondly makes the more poetic choice – is able to achieve a modern voice; one which, through juxtaposition - here in the very space between two words - is able to conjure the poetic effect. (Need one wonder why then Pound finds it unnecessary in the next line for “gonorrhea” to be identified as “comic”?)
The rest of the “Death by Water” manuscript evidences Eliot’s worst and most
typical stylistic flourishes: the confessional and personal tone lapsing into vague
nonsense: “…I was frightened beyond fear…” (67). The piece receives stern treatment
from Pound, but the entire section reads as though it exists merely as a set-up for the
chill-inducing beauty of the last ten lines, which Eliot chooses to let stand on their own
(though not without first seeking Pound’s approval in a letter) (EP Let 171).

To cut the preceding four pages of setting, description and characterization is a
distinctly modern choice; a choice to remain abstract in the context yet specific in the
detail, to sustain impersonality, to allow juxtaposition to do the work, and to clear the
sentiment to the bone of the bare word. By this late point in the poem’s creation Eliot
seems to understand the aim of Pound’s editorial drive, and successfully executes “What
the Thunder Said” with almost no interference from his editor.

Pound makes no serious edit from this point forward in the poem, other than his
strong advisement against Eliot’s inclusion of three additional fragments to close out the
entirety (EP Let 169). Yet a consideration of these fragments yields the underlying
reasons behind both the failure and the success of the poem in total.

5.5 The Poem as Situation

_The Waste Land_ has been criticized from its first publication for its unrepentantly
bleak vision of the modern condition; critics from I.A. Richards to Maude Ellman have
written of its “bitterness and desolation,” of its tendency to stammer “its orisons in
Babel” and “implode…under the pressure of its contradictions” (Ellman 138) American poets writing in the shadow of The Waste Land (most notably Williams and Crane) responded with vociferous objections to it in both private letters and in their poetry itself, presenting - or attempting to present - radically alternate views of an American poetics. There is sufficient evidence, however, to indicate that Eliot did not intend The Waste Land to be such a profound statement of desolation.

After the “shantih, shantih, shantih,” which ends “What the Thunder Said,” Eliot planned to insert three separate fragments to function as a conclusion to the poem. One fragment “Song for Opherion” had already been published the previous year and its dates of composition predate those of the body of the poem proper. The other two fragments date from the months of 1921 in which Eliot was primarily concerned with completion of The Waste Land and yet these pieces were assigned titles on their own: “Exequy” and “Dirge.” There remains some debate as to when, precisely, Eliot chose to incorporate these particular poems into the larger text, since he had cannibalized other old poems and fragments for insertion throughout The Waste Land, but his intention to use these pieces at the close are undoubted, due to Pound’s strong advice against such a move in a letter from the first months of 1922 (EP Let 169).

Lyndall Gordon has written that what these three fragments constitute is an attempt by Eliot to dramatize a scene of redemption; that Eliot’s initial vision of the poem was one of a spiritual progress, a “spiritual autobiography” (570). Lyndall writes: “The Waste Land began as the purely personal record of a man who saw himself as a potential candidate for a religious life but was constrained by his own nature and distracted by
domestic claims” (570). Due to the presumably negative reaction the readership of the day would exhibit to such a pilgrim’s progress, the final poem, in Lyndall’s view, sublimates Eliot’s initial drive in an attempt to reach its readers “by indirection” (570). Eliot’s strategy of covert autobiography was successful, then, in abstracting its autobiographical elements enough for its readers to identify with the disillusionment of the speaker, yet unsuccessful in that the larger intentions of the poem were obscured. Lyndall places the blame for such obfuscation, predictably, at the feet of Pound. While Pound asserted the poem was the great vindication of the modernist movement, Eliot himself quickly put distance between himself and his breakthrough work, declaring mere months after its publication that he no longer recognized it (WL MS xxv). Lyndall makes a convincing case that Eliot’s intentions for The Waste Land were thwarted by Pound’s refusal to allow a more straightforward autobiography of the spiritual quest. The outlines of this quest, however, can be easily discerned in a consideration of the intricacies of the aforementioned Plan. The guiding force then for Eliot in the composition of the poem itself is the Plan, a meta-poem of sorts upon which he hangs the particulars of his own biography (564).

This guiding force was ostensibly neutered by Pound’s insistence to eliminate the final three sections which would have provided this more rounded finale. Such a “complete” poem could then be better understood as a progress towards sainthood in the model of Augustine; a progress which was realized more fully, Lyndall believes, in Eliot’s later works Ash Wednesday and the Four Quartets (570). This may very well be the case, but if we are to grant Lyndall’s suggestion that The Waste Land would appear
more complete with the final three sections included, we would also have to admit – as
Lyndall stops just short of suggesting herself - that the poem would be weaker.

“One test,” Pound writes in the letter discouraging the inclusion, “is whether
anything would be lacking if the last three were omitted” (169). Leaving aside for a
moment the tantalizing implications of “test,” I’d like to examine first the idea of
“lacking.” “Song,” already published as “Song for the Opherion” the year previous,
contains typically dazzling Eliotic imagery (“the surface of the blackened river / is a face
that sweats with tears”) though it be imagery already included elsewhere in *The Waste
Land* (“the river sweats”) (WL MS 99). Present as well in “Song” is the recurrent theme
from the larger poem of “throbbing between two lives,” rendered here as “bleeding
between two lives” (99). The scene, however, is strikingly original insofar as it begins
from the riverbank on which the speaker of *The Waste Land* is last seen fishing. Across
the river from this vantage he now sees “the campfires shake the spears” (99).

What this provides, most conspicuously, is another *place*, as well as another
*people* – that is, a place in which the speaker is not, and a people of which he is not a part
– a notable departure from the style and tone of the poem up to that point. The speaker
offers here something beyond his power to subsume; a place he can see, but as yet cannot
enter. Other than this vision, “Song” closes without further advancement.

“Exequy” opens in the voice of a man torn, predictably, between two visions: one
the local life of a suburban husband, the other a brooding Italian narcissisus. While the
theme matches that of some scenes from *The Waste Land* the overall tone indulges in the
worst of Eliot’s style. We are presented with a “grove” which contains marble statuary;
“garlands” abound in “a bloodless shade among the shades…while the melodious fountain falls” (101).

Certainly the elements comprising this scene (indeed the very language itself) could be considered satirical, and yet it is this very kind of “bloodless” satire – the deflation of such an easy target as British symbolism (a target which had been effectively skewered and stylistically surpassed by Eliot himself as early as “Prufrock” ten years previous) – that has no place in The Waste Land which repeatedly implodes the empty satisfactions of ironic detachment.

The relatively simplistic fragment “Exequy,” which turns in the final stanza to confront its pathetic narrator with an Indic suicide and the sounds of laughter from an infernal Dante, takes the larger poem no place it has not already been. The notion that the indecision of a superficial bourgeois is critically undermined by the forgotten primal forces of ages past is not a new sentiment to The Waste Land by page 21. As a continuance of the section preceding it, “Exequy” presents nothing vital.

The final section – “Dirge” – would ostensibly finish The Waste Land and it begins with the echo of the song from The Tempest which Eliot reworked obsessively into the text of the long poem proper: “those are the pearls that were his eyes.” The change that is implied by Shakespeare’s line as utilized by Eliot – the possibility of change offering the shadow of redemption – is worked out more fully here in “Dirge.”

It begins at “full fathom five” where Bleinstein lies, and it returns to a theme we see elsewhere in Eliot’s poetry, where “the rats are beneath the piles, and the jew is beneath the lot” (SP 35). But Bleinstein is down here at the bottom of the ocean to
“suffer a sea change…rich and strange” (WL MS 121). At the sea floor Bleinstein is purged of his discriminating traits: his nose rots away (a Jewish nose?); his bones begin to protrude - not from his skin but more importantly from his “clothes.” The figure of the Jew Bleinstein is progressively reduced to his spiritual bone, or perhaps his incorruptible essence. This figure is not caught between, but is “caressed” between two tides that roll the him “gently” as his lips “unfold” to reveal not “black yellow” teeth (this Eliot crosses out) but teeth of “gold.”

Could this be yet another swipe at Jewish avarice? If so it is a weak and inconsequential swipe. I believe what is of greater importance here, since Eliot eliminates the negativity of “black yellow” to leave the more enchanting “gold,” is the delicacy of the image: a body at the bottom of the ocean, stripped of flesh and clothes; of identity. The final image is a skeleton riddled with gold, held softly by the sea. It is an image of peace, one which Eliot sentimentalizes further in an early draft, adding “sea nymphs nightly tend his watch” (119). These nymphs become lobsters in a later draft and it is these creatures that would finally close the poem, eerily grating out a triple call, “scratch scratch scratch,” mindless, insistent and insectile; a “shantih, shantih, shantih” purged of all sense (121).

Such a vision would finish The Waste Land on firmer feet, certainly less hysterical feet, than the closing of the poem proper. Gordon has written that this scene is a stab at the mystic, at a transcendence offered by the most concrete image of emptiness material reality allows: the sea floor (the very setting, perhaps not coincidentally, of Mallarmé’s Coup de des) (568). The fragment from which Eliot finally lifted “those are
the pearls…,” in which crabs and eels attend to the corpse of Bleinstein instead of lobsters, ends with a line furthering Gordon’s supposition: “still and quiet brother, are you still and quiet” (WL MS 119)

Eliot would then leave his corpse drowned in the water so thirsted after on the barren plain, surrounded and tended to by creatures of the sea. Such an octopus’s garden will strike even the most casual readers of Eliot as familiar. It’s the ending to “Prufrock.”

Gordon believes that the Plan of the quest and the Fisher King and the confrontation at the chapel perilous was not constructed as a pale imitation of Joyce’s *Ulysses* and not intended to stun modern readers into a the reverberations of mythic immanence. It was built instead as the indirect confession of Eliot’s own emotional biography; the Plan is a structure upon which Eliot hoped to hang his own understanding of himself.

In this formulation, the redemption denied Eliot here after his wandering in the waste land of a failing marriage, a hated job and a nervous breakdown is realized poetically in *Ash Wednesday*. Eliot’s poetry can thus be imagined not as independent pieces but each one a chapter in a larger work – each one an exploration and a test of a moment in his life, and therefore each one functioning as a forcing of his emotional reality. The poetry is a process of discovery and an exploration of Eliot’s own story of himself. The chapter of *The Waste Land* was not supposed to end ruined and chanting by the dry banks of a gray river, but exquisite and delicate, lulled into the comforting sleep of eternity at the floor of the ocean.
Pound has very different ideas. Based on his rigorous process of editing, Pound was preeminently concerned with the crafting of a poem that suited more aesthetic ends than personal ones. The manifest action of the poem and this questing Plan must be understood as two very different things, kept on separate levels thanks only to Pound’s insistent disruption. He continually prevents the fusing of Eliot’s own emotional experience (the erudition and desperation which was worthy of poetics) to someone else’s story.

If this story – this quest – has already been told truthfully by someone else, then a repetition of that story absent of an experience of its truth would amount to something a good deal worse than plagiarism, it would amount to a poetic evil. In other words, Pound insisted that Eliot tell the truth.

Returning to “Tradition and the Individual Talent” we see a literal quest guided only by an abstract belief in “artistic surrender” and the concrete process of the critical dialectic. If *The Waste Land* concluded with “Dirge,” however, we would have a poem in which the desire for transformation is forced on to the page. It would be forced because Eliot already possesses an idea of what a way out of the waste land is supposed to look like: he is supposed to transcend the barren desert and rest in a mystical tomb. But the personal experience of such a transcendence which Eliot possesses has already been poetically transcribed in “Prufrock” and is thereby exhausted. In search of a conclusion, Eliot turns, then, not forwards into the unknown, risking the poem itself in a literal quest for a conclusion; he simply grafts on an event already experienced to stand in for the event that *should* be there.
Recall that in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” Eliot strives for the indescribable ideal of “artistic surrender” and stumbles instead on the notion of “objective correlative.” This is the perfect model of “progress” if we can call it that, insofar as “artistic surrender” is never grasped; what is grasped instead is an idea which has critical applications, reached through a critical process. Eliot found what he needed in material reality – the “objective correlative” - due to the pursuit of the unreachable goal of the enunciation of artistic surrender.

But in the poem and unlike in the essay, Eliot uses a Plan with a clearly defined path: a sinner’s progress and redemption. Bereft of an abstract process with which to materially engage, Eliot follows the models of the confessions and the myths. This process, unlike the dialectic, already contains its own answer, and not in an abstract presentation, but in a very rigid and codified representation: the obstacles encountered are already enumerated; the processes of struggle and success are nominated; the ending already written.

The truth, on the other hand, is a process of material discovery, not the traversal of a model already formed. The truth is not a straight line towards a clearly defined goal, but a struggle of becoming. Pound willfully cuts the head off of Eliot’s arc, eliminating the final three sections, because to represent a process of truth already presented elsewhere is false poetry; not a truth, but its simulacrum. Pound saves the poem through his denial of a conclusion and it is this very denial which makes The Waste Land the preeminent modern poetic statement. The poem reveals the very tragic finitude of the modernist sensibility, and that tragedy provides its power.
Badiou writes in his *Ethics* that when a radical break in a situation, under names borrowed from real truth processes, convokes “full” particularity or presumed substance of that situation, what we are then dealing with is a simulacrum of truth and not the truth itself (73). This means that when an element already present in a given situation is nominated as the event, then an arc of truth which pursues this event is a false one.

This occurs quite often, most often in instances where the event so named *was once* an event of truth – that is, was once outside of the situation – but now lies within the situation. What was once anonymous and abstract is now named, understood, locatable, and finite. When an individual grasps for the truth instead of being grasped by it, she can only reach for truths already proclaimed. A conscious search for an event is only capable of locating the ruins of an ancient event which marked change in a previous, and now vanished, situation. Fidelity to such an exhausted event incarnates just such a simulacrum (74).

The danger of such a process lies in the finite nature of the exhausted event. If the event already lies in the situation, the operation of the count in a simulacrum, just as in a truth, results in a re-naming of all elements present in the situation, but in a simulacrum the situation remains closed; the operation of the count therefore goes about a process of voiding everything and affirming nothing in a hellish purge without abatement: “fidelity to the simulacrum” Badiou writes “is necessarily the exercise of terror” (77).

If a consequence of a truth is intended - that is, if it is guided consciously - then nothing new can be discovered. Every element of the situation will be judged as
insufficient, since what was sufficient for an already named event has forever vanished. The truth, on the other hand, aims towards abstractions not already realized. The enemy of a truth is that which already is (73). We could understand a simulacrum, then, as a warped nostalgia for how things used to be.

In the case of Eliot, the simulacrum of the Plan is possible thanks only to the past successes of such a plan (Augustine, Bunyan, perhaps Malory) that were genuinely evental. Not only does Eliot expect to find the truth of The Waste Land in the evental work of others, but in his own previous work as well, and this is why such an ending as the three sections provide would amount to a poetic evil: they are not earned.

Eliot wants to force the truth. The truth he forces is not the truth of The Waste Land as it exists up to the point of the three sections’ insertion, but the truth of his own emotional life. It could be charitably said (as Gordon has done) that Eliot has yet to write his redemptive poetry, but we could say instead that Eliot has yet to write the poetry that will constitute the next step backwards. The Waste Land stands at a crossroads, and the choices it provides are whether to continue forward with the suicidal despair evident in its final lines or to renounce the very validity of this despair.

The Waste Land as Eliot intended it could be understood as a single step along Eliot’s biographical arc of truth; as a forcing of Eliot’s own biography; a test as to whether the dismemberment of Bleinstein points the way out of his desperation. But Pound takes the poem away from Eliot’s biography and ends it instead at its most profound moment; that is, before the formulation of a clear answer. Eliot knew where he was heading (in his notebooks he’s writing “I am the resurrection”) but he is incapable, in
1922, of expressing it in the poetry (WL MS 111). His intention all along, it seems, is to move forward towards such a redemption, along a presupposed arc which affords this ending, and *The Waste Land* is a testing and a failing of the dramatization of this redemptive moment.

What Pound disallows, specifically, is the full blossoming of a previous truth and present simulacrum. What he does allow to blossom is the truth of the full tragedy of the modern position. It is in this sense that the poem is not a failure, because it is not false. It is then a truthful enunciation, insofar as we imagine the situation of modernism to be demarcated by the poetic act of *The Waste Land*. And as it speaks modernism, the poem itself is half-made, itself throbbing between two lives, or better between two authors; between the place and the Plan of Eliot and the Master and process of Pound; forever tragically undecided if it is to be a love without proof or proof without love.

What does Eliot possess in a successful sequence such as “Tradition and Individual Talent,” that he lacks here in *The Waste Land*? Two things: one, a belief in an abstract and unreachable goal (Eliot’s “goal” of redemption is neither abstract nor unreachable); two: an abstract and anonymous process with which he can engage in order to move into the unknown. Pound, however, has both.

Pound was vociferous in the enumeration of both his goals and his process throughout his career, but especially in the first decades of the 20th century, when he worked as a tireless cheerleader for not only Eliot but Joyce, Williams, Lewis, HD, Hemingway and any of a number of writers who would come to change the manner in
which English literature was written. The essays Pound wrote during his years in London and Paris energetically expound his poetic theories and before his total withdrawal into the labyrinth of the Cantos, Pound concentrated all his energies on those artists he believed capable of creating important art, because his overarching goal was to facilitate the perpetual manufacture of great art; an unending, unreachable goal.

Yet his search for a process, for a system of linguistic understanding which would enable him to demonstrate to others how, exactly, the modern writing would behave, remains perhaps his single greatest modern literary innovation. Recall his advice to Eliot: “One test is whether anything would be lacking…” In light of the dilemma so illustrated earlier, and so demonstrated in The Waste Land, Pound’s “tests” gesture towards a way out.

5.6 The Impossible Pound

What is unavoidable in first reading Pound’s early essays is his desire for a method; for a coherent, replicable process with which would not only assist in the critiquing of poetry but consist of guiding principles for the creation of poetics as well. As early as 1910 in “The Wisdom of Poetry” Pound locates in science a proper model for such a process, and invokes scientific metaphors to explain how literature should be produced. He believes that literature should be animated by the same brand of truth as science; that literature should consist of facts discovered by replicable processes. These poetic facts he often writes could be discovered only because they pre-exist, and poetry is
understood here as a system of re-animation of these facts in the interest of the furthering of nothing less than the progress of humanity. Imagism was in reality a brief phase for Pound, who found in the later term “vortex” the more perfect description of the linguistic presentation of such facts.

Poetry is best utilized for Pound when it serves in the uncovering of vortexes; when it presents facts-as-images-as-words, and these vortexes exist as such because they communicate basic truths about the human race (PE 186). This is a primary reason why Pound was a tireless champion of ancient civilizations (he was often willing to sidestep most literature from 1600 to 1900) and it is in these bygone civilizations, he believed with Vico-esque intensity, that such facts were best mined and exposed in written language (EW 192). Such a process in which language was utilized in the interest of the presentation of truth, Pound insists in his early essays, was lost to literature centuries ago and consequently activated again by science. Science, Pound believed (much to his own chagrin) was the hard, clear discourse of his age, yet he believed literature possessed the potential to demonstrate a power equal to that of science and he sought to restore literature to such a position (256). Literature could once again aspire to explain man’s existence to himself, however, only if it was cleared of the superfluities that had attached itself to the poetic use of the language since roughly the end of the Jacobean age.

Literature before (particularly) the Romantics held a great appeal to Pound because, among other reasons, it was less dependent upon an idealization of ineffable poetic genius. Nonsensical individual genius would not do for Pound as a stable bedrock upon which the production of literature was to rest because he strove continuously for a
replicable model and his mission (for he was most certainly a man of missions) was to teach such a model and to disseminate such a model among the writers of his time. It was in this way that he planned to improve humanity’s lot and to, with poetry, re-introduce man to himself.

In the second decade of the century we see Pound writing things like: “as the abstract mathematician is to science so is the poet to the world’s consciousness” (194). His ideal poet is the theorist, the constructor of possibilities; and like a mathematician the poet should be governed by a strict and robust logic, animated by a series of abstract axioms through which to understand any real-life particular. These include: direct treatment of the thing; use no word that does not contribute to the presentation; the natural object is always the adequate symbol; go in fear of abstractions; don’t be descriptive, and so forth.

“The symbolists used arithmetic,” he writes, meaning that one image equals a particular number; a star, for example, always means the same thing (281). If this is indeed the case then the imagists must use algebra: a star will only glean its meaning from its juxtaposition. Higher math, he writes, creates form, and this is done with formulas – “the equation (x-a)2+(y-b)2 = r2…is not a particular circle, it is any and all circles. It is the circle free from space and time…it is in the universal” (289).

Mathematics becomes for Pound the best descriptor of the poetic. He suggests that if poetics is practiced like mathematics, if it is aimed towards the uncovering of truth, “causing the form to come into being” – then we can once again create great works of art on par with those of the ancient world (289). And it is absolutely necessary that we have
great art works because these things have always stood, he writes, as “lords over fact,” just as he believed “the statements of analytics,” were themselves lords over fact in his present day (289).

The facts which govern humanity, then, pre-exist and they must be uncovered and re-activated with and through art. But such action is impossible without a clear understanding of the structure which governs this process; of the meta-ontology which can be best understood in mathematical terms. This ultimately mathematical relation — the purely abstract juxtaposition — is the structure from which we draw the poetic effect which in turn enables us to create poetry, which in turn founds the instants of our very existence. Pound is, in this very interesting period, moving towards a reconsideration of grammar.

But the blind operations of grammar are only tools in the larger drama. What is at stake here for Pound is a question of technique: “technique is the test of a man’s sincerity; in law when it is ascertainable; in the trampling down of every convention that impedes or obscures the determination of the law, or the precise reading of the impulse” (259). Satisfied that he has long since discovered the proper technique — one founded and explored with HD, with Yeats, with Wyndham Lewis — Pound identifies “sincerity” as its driving engine. “Sincerity” understood to mean seriousness; commitment; belief, and this is the type of belief which will set apart, in Pound’s mind, the modern poetry from the “slithering” verse of previous decades, if not centuries (262). Belief, expressed in the proper application of techniques which address an underlying grammar, will in Pound’s mind unite writers in the cause of creating great poetry. This flies directly in the face,
naturally, of any cult-of-the-genius, which can be understood as, more consequential to us, the celebration of the autonomous individual: “it is tremendously important that great poetry be written,” Pound writes, “it makes not a jot of difference who writes it” (260).

Poetry, here, is akin to a living thing; the best a human can do is to subject herself to it. In subjecting herself to poetry, the individual becomes a subject. To commit oneself to it is to be in it and thereby, be. If the subject only exists through a commitment to truth then, for Pound, modern poetry was this truth. And what is this poetry, precisely? “It will be harder and saner, it will be… ‘nearer the bone’” and “its force will lie in its truth” (262). Look how he writes of it: it has not yet happened, but it will; when modern poetry occurs, it will have been such things.

It is in pursuit of this unknown poetry that Pound joins with Ernest Fenollosa to write, in “The Chinese Character as a Medium for Poetry” that English is an inherently corrupted language; it is an effective if crude Anglo-Saxon ruined by the pernicious influence of vague and philosophical Latin. Ancient languages, however, still hold on to remnants of this direct connection between what the authors call “the real” and the word (325). Words had at one point in history been the form; words used to be capable of existing as the form around which energy and emotion found an expression of itself. English has completely lost the ability to do such a thing. But for the authors there is a language which retains it: Chinese.

It is not necessarily important here as to whether Pound got his Chinese “right.” He was never interested in direct translation (once telling a translator of his own work not
to write what he said but what he meant to say) and was fervent in his belief that the poetic survived any translation; that the poetic kernel retained in the practice of language itself. Pound’s Chinese translations were not only disastrously erroneous, but, as Ming Xie has pointed out, his entire conception of Chinese was blinded by an Orientalist idealism. But this is exactly the point: what is most crucial is what Pound believed Chinese to be. Upon the Chinese language Pound reflected his model of perfection and the goal of his search: the visual image and the resonance of the word combined cleanly in the vortex of the Chinese ideogram. It is as though, Hugh Kenner suggests, this writing had been waiting five thousand years for Pound to find.

The combination between the Thing and the Sign, the authors write, is something neither mathematics nor the Arabic alphabet is capable of achieving alone. In English, Pound and Fenollosa believe, there always remains a dialectic between two elements – “two things added together do not produce a third thing but suggest some fundamental relationship between them”; and these “two things” are always, for Pound, nouns (310). A sentence, then, expresses a relationship between two nouns, and executes this expression with the synthetic action of a verb. An English sentence is, consequently, built to do one of two things: complete a thought, or connect a subject and a predicate. But both of these things are impossible.

In the first case, one thought expressed in a sentence can only engender more sentences. A thought could never be “completed” in language since “acts are successive, even continuous” and to cut one act apart from the whole is artificial. “There could be no complete sentence…save one that would take all time to pronounce.” To name every
element takes an infinite amount of time, due to the fact that an infinite amount of elements are involved. An infinity, thereby, expresses nothing. Such an infinite plain, a barren place, provides nothing more than a setting. English as this plain can express nothing other than its sheer existence as language (311).

What can be said is, then, both everything and nothing. Relationality, bereft of any organizing feature, is therefore total and nonexistent. All is homogenous. English sentences only illuminate the impossibility of their own completeness. The simplistic real of the word offers little more than nihilistic opportunities of deconstructive performance of this fact. The place, in other words, requires a master to nominate it as such.

Yet the other definition of a sentence – uniting subject and predicate – forces us to fall back on what Pound and Fenollosa call “pure subjectivity.” The nature of the subject of the sentence depends upon the speaker, just as the nature of the predicate depends upon the speaker, and so all is dependent only upon the speaker. This is a totalitarian understanding of language in which there is a final and complete thought expressed, but that very thought and its expression is dependent upon the whims of an assigned Master. The problem with this, naturally, is it offers “no possible test of the truth of a sentence [itals mine].” Those who recognize this impasse, and refuse to embrace the fascistic solution of this very modern dilemma, are threatened with the possibility that “speech would carry no conviction” (310).
We arrive again at the fundamental impasse of modernism: a choice between the nihilism of the infinite place and the terror of the masterful pronouncement; proof without love, love without proof.

Once again the answer is easy to imagine but difficult to perform. The way out of this bind, Badiou implies in “A Poetic Dialectic,” is to locate a name for the place not assigned by a master. The setting must exist as place, but not due to the word of a master who has named it. Here is where the very concept of truth regains its importance for the modern, for without “truth” as a guiding principle our options are forever chained to the enunciations of a master. To detach truth from the word of the master, while avoiding the un-repayable debt that such a sacrifice would engender, is the very solution to the modern dilemma, but it is a solution which demands that the master must never have been. The infinite elements of the setting must, somehow, as Pound and Fenollosa write, “work out their own fate (309).” The dialectic of subject and object must collapse into the very verb of their being.

For Pound, written Chinese avoids this entire dialectic. The ideogram combines noun and verb into a single unit, and thereby allows Pound to imagine a system of perpetual truth – a language of constant verbs - guided in its formation not by a single hand but by the billions of hands that have fashioned it over the millennia. These Chinese verbs Pound celebrates, each one simple and concise; “is” does not exist, thereby necessitating the illustration of concrete relationships. “To be” is “to take from the moon with the hands” and as such is poetic insofar as this language depends almost exclusively upon metaphor for its operation of understanding (314). For Pound, a Chinese character
is the very presentation of a situation. While in English we may write “in,” the Chinese equivalent is “to remain”; “and” is “to be parallel”; there are five forms of “I,” illustrating the difference between what “a spear in hand” might express differently than five fingers over a mouth (315).

Further, each single Chinese ideogram has been determined not by a single individual, but has been honed over the centuries through repetition – a system, perhaps if we can imagine, in which a true word arises as a weakness in the system is discovered through its continual testing.

In the last pages of this essay the writers furnish the ideograms for “The sun rises in the east” (329). It is a sentence which amounts to a stratification of just a few symbols: the ideogram for “sun” is included in the ideograms for both “rises” as well as “east”, but Pound (and I believe, based on the language here, that it is Pound) focuses on the verb “rises.” It is here, with this verb, that the connection between the place of the east and the master of the sun takes place; but again, in the ideogram, place and master exist in the identical space, united in the vortex of the language. In one figure are all moments in one place; the truth as existence itself. This is the unification of opposites, the living real, the tongue of the angels. As such, it is impossible.

And yet, curiously, Pound focuses not on the ideogram for “east,” which summarizes and contains the symbols for both “sun” and “rises”; he focuses on the middle term, the verb, because it is here that the total word is becoming – not yet became. It is here that the pursuit is in full stride, that the goal is within his grasp yet not grasped. The sun will rise, is rising, is in the process of doing so, just as the sentence is in the
process of presenting what it is to be, and here is where Pound leaves us, on a precipice of a perpetual becoming in language.

What we can see here is the unraveling of the modern knot; a disjoining of the perpetual twining of totalitarianism and relativism, a twinning which has been understood throughout to find its echoes in subject / object, speaker / place, terror / apathy, communism / capitalism, love without proof / proof without love. Yet certainly, as expanded upon in the analysis of Jameson, such dichotomies are more useful in the honing of the terms involved than in reaching a synthetic conclusion. “If synthesis there be in Hegel” Jameson writes, “it seems crucial that there exist only one” (375); it is for this reason that a dialectic with which this paper wrestles strives not to reach a synthesis of these terms so much as to illustrate their twinning as indicative of the modernist thought Badiou tasks himself with overcoming.

The solution to the problem (if solution there indeed be), is predicted quite clearly in Pound’s desire to move past the master-figure; not to recreate it as Yeats does; not to sacrifice it as Woolf does, but to render it altogether irrelevant, investing faith instead in the operation of a replicable process aimed towards an unreachable goal.

We can imagine Badiou beginning with the conclusion here of Pound, insofar as Pound reaches his limit from within language itself; absent a language which satisfies his conditions, Pound simply tasks Chinese with the solution, in effect creating an impossible tongue.
The poetic in Badiou, however, is merely one condition out of several, and in my estimation is at least equaled in importance by the mathematic. As demonstrated by theorists from Pound until today, the problems with language as a clear vehicle of communication are several due to the interrelatedness of words, the variant structures of the sentence, and even the supposed stability of grammar itself.

Poetry-as-language is in essence a worldview for Pound, and although he does sense the power of mathematics he seems too ignorant of its theoretical potentialities to apply its functions to poetry. As a result, he brings us to the mystical edge of language in a presentation of his belief; what is required, however, in order to separate logic from the poetic, is a representation. The problem for Pound, finally, is that it becomes impossible to represent language with language. A more clear, and radically separate, system is necessary.

This is why Badiou imagines that mathematics is equally as important as poetry, since poetry may attest, but only mathematics offers a process to attain poetry attestation due to its ability to grasp the infinity towards which the poetic gestures. Mathematics is able to test the statements of poetics. And test for what? For truth. Because here with Pound at the dawn of literary modernity when the real ramifications of the infinite relativity of language are just beginning to arise, here “truth” is still an important piece of the puzzle; truth as founder of subjectivity, and truth as the nominating force of the place.

In Pound’s model of the Chinese language, as well as in Badiou’s set theory ontology, there is no founding master figure, and yet neither is there an infinite relativity; both have evolved to their position of functionality due to a continuous process of testing,
and yet what Pound’s model denies is also the very weakness of Badiou’s set theory ontology, namely: without the possibility of external variance there can be no change; and without change, the processes of the system are doomed to consume the system itself.

This is finally what the poetic enunciation brings to the mathematic process: a guarantee of its own exteriority, shoving the process outside of itself. Pound seems to sense this, but Badiou’s familiarity with mathematics enables him to demonstrate it, to enunciate it, to philosophize it, and to finally allow us to understand it, and it is in this way that he is able to accomplish the task Pound sets: to erupt into a place in which the master never will have been.
Conclusion

It is to Pound’s credit that he remains focused on the possibility of truth in the form of a resolution of opposites – an impossible desire which I nevertheless believe is crucial to the affecting of any change. It is a vision of truth which Badiou presents; a truth locatable (albeit perversely from our vantage) in *The Waste Land*, and which is clearly evident in Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent” perhaps even more clearly than in Pound. Both Eliot and Pound were well aware of the form and the stakes of the modern problem but differed in what they believed to be its solution. While Eliot embraced a totalitarian solution sooner than Pound, both men eventually aligned themselves with conservative and reactionary movements; both men finally subdued, perhaps, by the growing simulacrum of modernism itself.

But modernism presents us with a simulacrum only insofar as we believe that an actual choice exists between relativity and totalitarianism. As I have noted earlier, Badiou often presents such false dichotomies not necessarily because he is unable to present dilemmas in another fashion but because he attempts to present a pattern of the tragic finite thought he has tasked himself with overcoming. To return to the twinned notions of word and number, or perhaps better - poetry / mathematics - we can locate in microcosm the movement of Badiou’s project; namely the very function of philosophy itself.

Without the dianoia of mathematical thought, the power of the poetic enunciation is free to bind itself to politics or to love and to consequently wreak havoc on both
situations as its declaration of immanent presence is held under sway of already pre-existing power. There must be a process of investigation into the underpinnings of the poetic enunciation. Conversely, without the assertion of poetic speech, a situation is fated to remain closed and thereby vulnerable to the excesses of a blind count operating on the basis of an exhausted truth: all Jews must be destroyed; the Party must purge; the corporation must go bankrupt; no partner will ever be good enough.

Badiou seeks less to resolve the opposites he so often presents than to provide a distinct field in which opposites can both be held in existence – where one and the other can be held simultaneously, where the “compossibility” of both can be examined. That space, where the assertion of the word and the test of the number both exist concurrently, is philosophy. So many of Badiou’s investigations into mathematics, into literature and language, into politics or even into the key moments of philosophical history itself hinge more on the presentation of a dilemma, on the enunciation of the terms involved, than with arriving at in incontrovertible conclusion. In the moments when he is doing philosophy, this is his goal; given the assumed inability of either poetry or mathematics to know itself – and by extension of any term so assigned self-knowledge – philosophy is the very conditioning of one term with the other, not necessarily in the hopes of achieving a synthesis, but in the belief that, with an ordered yet flexible procedure, we can come to know the infinite nature of truth and move past the modernist dilemma grounded as it is in finitude. It is only such certainty that can become the support and guide of subjective action.
Such action would be the ultimate justification of philosophy as Badiou would imagine it, and such action is currently necessary. Having long ago worked through the totalitarian narrative of the first half of the 20th century, we as a society have now, however, reached the conclusion of the other horn of the modern dilemma, that of the infinitely relative place, the celebration of difference, the championing of divisions. Such a process has not only been divisive but has driven the very procedure of critical thought into a diaphanous exile. Limited as it remains by a sense of tragic finitude, such a situation critically undermines our ability as a society to understand the multiple situations which face us not only politically but emotionally and personally. Our understanding of ourselves remains stunted until philosophy is able to think through and past previous, tired, and outmoded conceptions, and a robust philosophy – reasoned, ordered, flexible – is vital in an age in which fundamentalisms of all stripes threaten to overtake the society that such a forgotten philosophy helped to construct.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


